

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Also by
ANDREW SOUTAR

Silence
Battling Barker
Consider Your Verdict
Island of Test
Neither Do I Condemn Thee
Worldly Goods
An Island for Two
Road to Romance
Pagans
Back to Eden
Leopard's Spots
Not Mentioned
The Phantom in the House
In the Blood
Butterflies in the Rain
Hornet's Nest
Dear Fools
Delilah of Mayfair
Green Orchard
The House of Corbeen
Some Fell Among Thorns
The Devil's Triangle
Silent Thunder
Pursuit

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

BEING A MORE OR LESS FAITHFUL
ACCOUNT OF THE ADVERSITIES
AND WANDERINGS OF AN IM-
POVERISHED FAMILY OF TITLE

by

ANDREW SOUTAR

London

HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers) Ltd.

S
cont

72

S

Acc. No = 83



83
83

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT GAINSBOROUGH PRESS, ST. ALBANS.
BY FISHER, KNIGHT AND CO., LTD.

***T**O my dear friend, Sir John Drughorn,
Baronet, of Ifield Hall, Sussex, this
story is dedicated in memory of happy days,
friendly arguments, and joyous reminis-
cences as we trudged the roads and fields
together. We have viewed life from many
angles and come to the unshakable con-
clusion that in love of work lies the secret
of true happiness. A.S.*

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. "LAUGH, AND THE WORLD LAUGHS WITH YOU"	9
II. INTIMATE NOTES ON THE SHADROW FAMILY	14
III. NEEDS MUST WHEN THE DEVIL DRIVES	40
IV. THE HOUSE WITH THE GOLDEN WINDOWS	49
V. PRIDE SITS IN THE BACK SEAT	68
VI. TRADITION WALKS WITH A LIMP	85
VII. THE FIRST NIGHT IN THE OPEN	103
VIII. FINDING LEVELS IS TOUGH WORK	115
IX. DERBY DAY ADVENTURES	119
X. SADIE, "BOLONEY", AND SOME HOME TRUTHS	137
XI. THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER	146
XII. THAT SLIP OF THE TONGUE	159
XIII. FALLEN STARS THAT GLITTERED	163
XIV. "A WANDERING MINSTREL, I"	177
XV. LIGHT O' LOVE	189
XVI. THE WATER NYMPH	193
XVII. A GIANT IN KNEE BREECHES	203
XVIII. WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE'S FIRE	211
XIX. CHALLENGE !	221
XX. CONFESSION	230
XXI. A QUIET GAME OF CARDS	236
XXII. BIG TRAGEDIES IN LITTLE HOUSES	241

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXIII.	THE "IDEA" MERCHANT	248
XXIV.	BLIND CAROL, THE HAPPY PHILOSOPHER	254
XXV.	NIGHT AND THE STARS	275
XXVI.	HUNTING THE BIG MONEY	276
XXVII.	A GAMBLE IN PROPERTY	294
XXVIII.	THE LIVE WIRE MAKES CONTACT .	298
XXIX.	THE MAN, THE MAID, AND THE HOUR	307
XXX.	WINDS MAY BLOW THEMSELVES OUT .	318
XXXI.	BACK TO THE OPEN ROAD	324
XXXII.	BEHIND THE MASK OF THE MUMMER .	333
XXXIII.	ON THE ROAD ! ON THE ROAD ! .	346

Strange Bedfellows

CHAPTER I

“LAUGH, AND THE WORLD LAUGHS WITH YOU”

WHEN the times are out of joint and all the troubles that Job and Pharaoh knew—and more—rise from nowhere to smite a fellow, he may struggle to his feet before the referee can count him out, take a fresh lease of life, and tear in like a cyclone to victory.

There is only one adversary that is invincible—Self-Pity!

By the time you come to the end of this story of the Shadrows, and Sadie—especially Sadie—you may have learned the great and elusive secret of how to make a comparative fortune pleasantly and without being particularly qualified for the job in the beginning.

These people in the story had a great many difficulties to overcome before they got their arms around the neck of the Golden Calf and hung on for keeps. There was nothing platitudinous about the change in their fortunes. They were not the kind of people who sit down and moralize about the perniciousness of riches and the everlasting glory of being thrifty and content with small blessings.

They had no connection, or sympathy, with self-appointed martyrs who are disposed meekly to accept all the kicks that may be administered in this life, in the hope and belief that meekness of spirit will be the first qualification for a feather-bed and a pair of wings in the next. If they were convinced of a future existence, they were not satisfied to bite on the bullet all the way through this one while the other fellow

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

picked his dishes from the menu and compelled service and subservience in return for hard cash.

They were not content to look at happiness through another man's eyes and thank Heaven that their wants were few. They wanted all they could get, and, frankly, they got it. They made a considerable fortune—not a moral fortune, but one of those heart-warming, stomach-filling, tangible affairs that moralists deplore yet appraise with hat in hand when they pass its symbol in the street.

The period over which the adventures of this family spread was that between 1925 and 1930. The historian of the future may describe this period—if he be honest and immune from traditional unctuousness—as the most critical in the story of the nation. Financial chaos followed the Great War and the Perplexing Peace. Industrial stagnation threw two or three million men out of employment. The civilized world laboured under deep depression.

How the Shadrows obtained that fortune shall be told hereafter, but the ultra-sensitive mind may be reassured in the beginning by the insistence that it was obtained with sufficient honesty to get past the censor of morals. They had adventures, but they didn't set out to look for hidden treasure buried in some abbey precincts or a cavernous hole in the ground: they knew that misers don't conceal their hoards in such primitive places nowadays. (They subsidize money-lenders and get it back tenfold with the aid of the Law.)

From first to last, the Shadrows discountenanced anything in the nature of fraud: rightly, they reasoned that if one makes fraud the principal means of getting rich one must make it mountainous in dimensions, colossal in its scope, in order to have it condoned by convention: the nibblers, or one-day-a-month rogues, don't stand the ghost of a chance with Virtue. There's nothing quite so despicable as a petty pilferer, and no hero-worship too fulsome for the man who takes a million from those who haven't the sense to protect it.

The Shadrows didn't "come into money": they

"LAUGH, AND THE WORLD LAUGHS"

forced their way to its lair, fought their way, sometimes. They had no influential friends to take pity on them and finance any wild-cat scheme they might have conceived. If money makes money, they hadn't sufficient to construct a good-looking threepenny-piece or one that would get past the scrutiny of a suspicious Scot. They were so poor that when they had paid the few remaining servants their wages they used to sit back and envy the domestics their riches. They kept up appearances wonderfully well, but the strain of deception was beginning to tell on their health.

The head of the family resigned from all County functions and managed to convey the impression that he had risen above them. (Keep your neighbour guessing and you have shackled his homage to you.) The dignity of a fine old English family was fairly well maintained before the Big Trek began, although many a time when they had the chance to part with it for a good square meal it was touch and go with their pride. They lived in Debrett, but they starved in the country.

Then, the luck changed.

Now, having satisfied the squeamish that the fortune of the Shadrows owed nothing to adventitious aids, they, in turn, may tolerate a little homily on that quality known as Luck!

We, most of us, have cursed luck and blessed it. We have thanked God for it and blamed Him for it. We have damned it so often that the wonder is it hasn't damned itself out of the affairs of man. We are not concerned with the luck of the gambler who wants to make something without working for it: we are discussing the luck of everyday life, when everything goes well for us, or puts its thumb to its nose and leaves us with the feeling that the rest of our days had better be employed in looking for a comfortable grave-space.

Luck? You know the waves of depression that surge over you like the breakers of the grey North Sea over the beach. You hate yourself for being down and

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

out and you hate the fellow who slaps you on the back and chants that soul-wearying song about a silver lining being on the edge of every cloud. You have reached the limit of human endurance. You moan to the world that your skin doesn't fit and God hates you.

It is easy to sing, you say, when the luck is in and the music that accompanies you in the singing is the jingling of money or the crisp, sweet rustling of bank-notes as you thumb them over in your hand.

Stale advice about silver linings is like standing aft a collier's funnel and sucking down the cinders and the soot. There is a mighty ball of solid lead suspended from the heavens and you are taking the weight of it, every two minutes, until you feel that it will crush the life out of you if the luck doesn't turn.

And good luck may be just around the corner taking a look at you.

When creditors are dunning you and you haven't the courage to pass the shops of the tradesmen lest a long, lean paw reaches out and grabs you by the shoulder and a voice yells louder than a ship's syren: "What about it?—"

When you have done your best according to your lights and played the Samaritan to your fellows; when you have scraped and saved and denied yourself luxury or the semblance of it so that you might help a lame dog over the stile; when you feel that you have "filled the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds' worth of distance run," and you appear to be getting as much reward as could be easily lost in the ear of an elderly flea——

When you come to the conclusion, as you walk the streets, that there isn't a friendly face in the crowd and it would be easy and comfortable to take a header over the parapet of a bridge, then, again, luck may be just around that corner gambling on the chance of your doing it.

Luck? It is just a matter of temperament. You may influence it. You may compel it. Luck is infectious. And it is just when you get tired, and stick out

"LAUGH, AND THE WORLD LAUGHS"

your chin and ask for the Big Punch that will lay you out for the full count, that luck comes along to take a hand in the game.

Luck is a fight-fan: he likes nothing so much as a good encounter. He will stand by the ring-side and watch a fellow hit by everything save the posts and the bucket, and, when he is sagging at the knees and cannot lift his arms shoulder high, and his eyes are seeing all sorts of figures dancing before them, and the floor of the ring is coming up to give him another welt, and the arc lamps are getting ready to drop on his dome, and the partisans are cheering the other fellow with yells of "Now boy! Finish him off!" . . . well, it is just about that moment when luck calls "Time!"

When the world seems dead set against you and you cannot get a wink of sleep because you fear what the morrow may bring; when you ask yourself if you have the strength to go through another day of mental torture and there is a black, hideous wall rearing itself up between you and the sunshine; when all the work you have done in the past seems to have been forgotten and you are getting old and wheezy and your engine is knocking in every cylinder, and the word, Futility, is written right across your heart, it is just about that time when luck comes around the corner and digs you in the ribs with his elbow.

The adventures of the Shadrow family (let it be emphasized) did not occur in prehistoric times when England was a free country and could stay out after dark without incurring the displeasure of the Government; they began after the outbreak of peace, following the Four Years' War. The generation that has no comprehensive knowledge of a moratorium may not fully appreciate the significance of the statement.

And now, in the expressive language that was forced on the country along with the other troubles during this period of depression, we have made contact and are ready to shoot.

CHAPTER II

INTIMATE NOTES ON THE SHADOW FAMILY

FIRST, a reference to Sadie. She was a slangy, lively-tempered, good-looking witch of a girl who came all the way from Walnut Street, Philadelphia, to "take a peek at", and "get the low-down on", the impoverished family of Sir Thomas Shadow, Baronet, County Something, Southern England.

When she connected with one of the choicest specimens of English dignity and Arctic chilliness on this afternoon in early summer, the shock to the household was so great that the moss-covered Shadow effigies in the nearby churchyard shivered and cracked so that the moss fell away from their surface.

There never was a baronetcy that didn't incite the malevolent to ask of each other why it was conferred and how much the recipient of the honour paid for it. Sir Thomas had become inured to that form of spitefulness; after all, it was no more than an ill-mannered exhibition of ignorance: those who felt that a baronetcy ought to be conferred only because of some signal service rendered to the State ought to refer to the origin of the distinction, when, in 1611, James, King of England, conceived the idea of raising the wind by selling the patent for a thousand a year.

Sir Thomas had long since become indifferent to what traducers might say or think about his ancestors, but this young woman, Sadie, stirred him up as with a pitch-fork. She stripped him of his dignity until he was as naked as a goldfish in a glass bowl and as amenable as a village idiot in the hands of a bogus share-pusher.

Sadie came to ingratiate herself with the Shadows,

NOTES ON THE SHADROW FAMILY

but she had her own ideas of how to go about the job. She was not depressed by austere looks and satirical comments. She wasn't afraid of any one of the family. She didn't care the flick of a gnat's wings what they might think about her quaint and expressive phraseology: she told herself that before long she would have them eating out of her hand.

The Shadrows, like many another English county family, had been compelled to economize since 'eighteen when the real struggle of the World War began. They were still clinging to the old home, Highfield Court, not out of sentiment but because they couldn't dispose of it. Once upon a time it had been a friendly beacon to wayfaring archæologists and historians; the surrounding moat, sufficiently wide to allow of boating, inspired a thousand conjectures about the fate of importunate creditors five hundred years before; the spacious rooms were never unlighted; the Hunt met on the lawns four or five times in the season; fellow justices of the peace were as humble as felons in the dock when they supped with Sir Thomas; local tradesmen declared on their bill-heads that they had the inestimable privilege of contributing to his larder.

The historical associations of Highfield Court were full of romance. More than one Royal head had rested beneath its roof. In the wooded grounds, around which the moat moved sluggishly, duels had decided quarrels which in latter days would have found settlement in the duller divorce courts. Deeds of daring were not infrequent happenings recorded in the family tomes on the shelves of the library.

There had been Shadrow adventurers who could have taught Paul Jones the artistry of piracy. Leading from the cellars, there was an underground passage that ran for three-quarters of a mile eastward and was attributed to the industry of the Shadrow who supplemented his fortune by a little smuggling. Near the house was the farmstead, now leased to an agriculturist

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

who never ceased to wonder which was the Shadrow that pinned his faith to thistle seed and black medick. Half a mile away was the fifteenth century church which Sir Thomas seldom entered.

In the days of prosperity, before the War, the family name frequently found its way into the London Press. The Conservative Party held Sir Thomas's political views in high esteem. He kept the seat secure for them. As an orator he was excellent; when he presided at a political meeting he never said more than: "I will now call on Sir Samson Redtapp to address you on the advantage to this country of a Conservative Government." His eyebrows added: "If there's a muttonhead in this gathering who dares to disagree with Sir Samson's sentiments I'll drown him in my moat the first time I get a chance."

Twice a week, Sir Thomas took his seat as Chairman on the County Bench of Magistrates. When he entered the court every police officer who had business there straightened himself and shouted "Silence!" to the public in attendance. His judgments were so familiar that the accused knew exactly what to expect the moment they learned that they would have to appear before him. He was never vindictive towards well-mannered thieves; he believed in giving high-speed motorists the benefit of the doubt; but God help the poacher or trespasser that came before him. A farmer had only to say that he saw the accused on his land for Sir Thomas to think of all the penal settlements he had read about and to which he might banish the rascal who had gone out in the stillness of night to replenish his cottage larder with a hare or a brace of birds.

Times had changed. The fortunes of the Shadrows of Highfield Court were so low that Sir Thomas was always taking those trips "abroad" that are so opportune when creditors press. On the day when the family affairs had reached a crisis, the servants had been reduced to one—Hogan, the angular Irish valet who

NOTES ON THE SHADOW FAMILY

had served as batman to Sir Thomas in India years before. The members of the family in residence were Lady Shadow (a semi-invalid with a wondrously sweet disposition, fully conscious of the broken condition of the household purse but insistent on the dignity of her rank), Harold, the eldest son, Phoebe, the only daughter and too young and modern to take life seriously, and Aunt Agatha, sister of Sir Thomas and widow of Lord Briskett. Aunt Agatha had two obsessions in life—her increasing poundage and a Pekingese dog named Wung. Sir Thomas hated the mentioning of either of them.

There was one other member of the family, Reginald, two years younger than Harold, and Highfield Court was awaiting his return from a three years' stay in America—awaiting him with the feverish expectancy of the Portuguese King who sat perched up in Pena Castle awaiting the return of the adventurous Vasco da Gama—he who knew better than to return without a new colony for the rest of the nations to filch in the fullness of time.

Much depended on the luck that had attended Reginald in the United States. Hogan had accepted the assurance, in lieu of six months' wages, that when the youngest son returned there would be such a rapid rise in Shadow stock that the market would break into a panic.

Reginald was the last hope. The family purse couldn't stand any further strain. The house was so heavily mortgaged that the roof sagged; the mortgagee was arriving that very day with the avowed intention of turning them out: he had been very lenient—Sir Thomas was disposed to admit that—but the mortgagee was a man of humble birth who itched to live in a country mansion; and why shouldn't he live in one that now belonged to him?

Reginald was a dear lad of twenty-three or -four when Sir Thomas collected two hundred pounds from the

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

debris and sent him to the States to make a fortune that should set them firmly on their feet again. Also, Reginald, when he left England, had the further distinction of being the fool of the family. Aunt Agatha refused to deprive him of that distinction in spite of the optimistic letters that had found their way from New York. For three years, Reginald had been in exile. He was coming home. The ship had docked at Southampton that morning.

The afternoon was waning when the fateful telegram arrived. Sir Thomas, stocky, white-haired, alert, military, felt the floor creak beneath his feet as he read the message. The fool of the family had proved himself a fool. The two hundred pounds that had been gambled on the project to send him to the States must be written down a dead loss. Reginald had telegraphed :

Not exactly broken but am bent like a hairpin
and like a hairpin full of wrinkles don't send car
to station we'll get there somehow Reggie.

The reference to the automobile was hurtful ; *that* was the first of the extravagances to go two or three years before ; the financial failure was deplorable ; the mystery of "*we'll* get there somehow" was intriguing.

The whole thing was disconcerting and wholly beyond elucidating by a magisterial mind : meaner problems had demanded a letter of inquiry to *The Times* or the *Morning Post*. The inanimate things in the study had life infused into them. The stolid mahogany bookcases hoisted their shoulders, as it were, so that the sporting guns carelessly placed on the top stared resentfully. (Their job was rabbits not prodigals, they seemed to suggest.) The stuffed fox in his glass case wagged his brush and chuckled : "What the devil did you expect from Reginald ?" The heavy green plush window curtains said in effect : "We'd better shut out the light and keep this dark secret in the family."

NOTES ON THE SHADOW FAMILY

Sir Thomas summoned Hogan, the traditional gentleman's gentleman who submitted to so much snubbing and badgering and ordering about that he might have been a refugee from justice. Hogan was one of those phenomenally healthy Irishmen who wouldn't put on an ounce of flesh if they devoured a herd of swine—thin, whalebone fellows with nutmeg complexions, china blue eyes, and regular camels for carrying the weight of other peoples' troubles on their back. Hogan could have made a fortune of his own if he hadn't spent so much of his time in helping the Shadows to hold on to theirs. There wasn't a menial position in the household he hadn't held at some time or another—valet, boots, parlour-maid, footman, butler, and all the rest of it. When there were horses in the stables he groomed and exercised them; when a water-pipe burst he got there before the plumber: he was a treasury of knowledge in an emergency; his temper had been so filed down that it was as smooth as the back of a baby's hand—he could listen to four or five different and simultaneous calls of "Hogan!" and not get flustered, and his memory was so considerate that he could never remember exactly how much was owing to him in back pay. The only hint he gave of his nationality was a faintly musical inflection of the voice; the only weakness he indulged was a habit of asking himself aloud, when he was alone, why the devil he allowed himself to be shackled to an English family that hadn't the "savvy" of a Connemara peat digger, got in the way of true progress in this life, and would only litter up Heaven if it ever got there.

"Hogan," said Sir Thomas, standing with his back to the fireplace, his hands tucked under his coat-tails and his beard jutting out like a bowsprit, "I'd like to see the whole family in here on a matter of supreme importance."

Hogan's nostrils twitched as though they suspected a leak in the gas-pipes; it was a muscle affliction he had

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

brought with him from India after an affray with a hill tribe.

"Including Lady Briskett, Sir Thomas?"

"Including my sister, Hogan."

"I don't think that her ladyship can come downstairs," said Hogan, and cocked his head on one side in a calculating attitude. "According to her diet sheet, Lady Briskett should be resting now. She's carrying the matter of a pound overweight, and my name's not Hogan if I can trace the cause of it."

"It is imperative that Lady Briskett should be present," said Sir Thomas.

Hogan shook his head.

"Worry," said he, "might fling her back, Sir Thomas."

Sir Thomas nodded understandingly. Nothing could dislodge his sister from her bed after she had retired for the afternoon rest.

"Wonderful nerve, Hogan," said he. It was a tacit admission that the proposed conference related to the financial troubles of the household. "She was resting, you'll remember, when the Germans bombed London in 'seventeen. We were staying at Claridge's at the time."

"True," said Hogan, regretfully, for he had no love to spare the elderly and corpulent widow, "but it was poor bombing."

"Summon the family," said Sir Thomas, coughing slightly. "First, my glasses. Thank you, Hogan. Now, my chair. Thank you, Hogan." Without Hogan to do it for him Sir Thomas couldn't have removed a bad egg from his breakfast plate.

Presently, the members of the family began to trickle in. Lady Shadrow, gentle-voiced and delicate, gave her husband an encouraging smile as he greeted her, the telegram in his hand. Aunt Agatha followed with her cumbersome bulk, her fifty acid years, and the peevish tongue of the confirmed hypochondriac. She brought with her the sinister Pekingese, Wung, carrying

NOTES ON THE SHADOW FAMILY

it under her arm in such a position that it invited comparison between its own flat features and her own.

"What's the news?" she inquired, usurping the right of Lady Shadow to ask the question. "Not more trouble, Thomas? I can't stand it."

Phoebe, the daughter, lounged in, sprawled inelegantly in an arm-chair and flung one leg over the arm-rest. A pretty girl of nineteen or twenty, Phoebe, with considerable experience of modern life and manner. There was nothing of the shrinking violet about Phoebe. She had been given the freedom of her age and generation probably because it was realized that she would have taken it in any case.

"What's the conference about, pater?" she asked. "I was in the middle of a gorgy story when Hogan butted in."

Aunt Agatha moved slowly in her chair to survey the modernist and the bold display of limb.

"Phoebe, my dear! Your knees!" said Aunt Agatha.

"Lift your gaze a little higher, auntie," said Phoebe languidly, "and you'll find your thoughts lift with it." Then to her father: "Now, dear, tell us the news."

He told them—told them in a deep, sad voice. Reginald had been in the States three years and all he was returning with was—a wrinkle!

Phoebe broke into the following silence with a yawn.

"Well," she exclaimed, "what did you expect the old bonehead to bring back? Coney Island?"

Another long silence. Then Sir Thomas looked anxiously in the direction of the door.

"Where's Harold?" he inquired.

Harold, the eldest son, was the literary member of the family—the branch from which much green fruit hung with the promise of ripening when the sun shone with anything like seriousness.

"In his room," said Phoebe. "If he hasn't got his nose into a Blue Book, he's studying cricket statistics."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

She added with a sigh: "Thank God, Reggie hasn't any brains."

Sir Thomas pulled himself together with an effort and addressed them in a lugubrious tone of voice. The end was come. They must leave the house. It was useless to bury their heads in the sand. Reginald had failed them and he was the last hope. That very day Sir Thomas had resigned from the County Bench of magistrates. That ought to convince them of the seriousness of the plight in which they were placed. Shadrows had been so long on the bench that it was inconceivable how the law could get along without one.

Aunt Agatha groped for her smelling-salts when she heard the news.

Lady Shadrow said gently: "No doubt your reasons were good, my dear."

Phoebe, the illogical modern, said: "I think you are wise, pater. You brought too much of the military spirit into your judgments, and people won't stand for that sort of thing, to-day. Fancy sentencing old Trulock to seven days for poaching!"

Her father bridled up at that. Poaching! God forgive the scoundrel. Heinous offence. Sportsmen reared game at great expense. Must stand behind British sportsmanship.

"Phoebe, I flatter myself——"

She was courageous.

"Flattering themselves," she said, "is the only pleasure some people get out of life. Frankly, pater, you never tried to understand the joy some of the poor people get out of being poor."

They were going off at another tangent. Hogan came in with Lady Briskett's reducing medicine; he was never a second too late.

"The bottle is nearly empty, my lady," said he. "Shall I order another?"

"No," said Aunt Agatha, firmly. "I've taken six already and I don't believe I'm an ounce lighter." She

NOTES ON THE SHADROW FAMILY

addressed the company, not Hogan, who was standing behind her chair. She detested Hogan even as he detested her.

"If I might be so bold, m'lady," said he with the best intentions in the world, "there was an uncle of mine in Dublin——"

"Really," said Aunt Agatha, and an icicle hung from every letter of the word.

"And he got so thin on limon juice that the bhoys would strike their matches on his back, takin' him for a lamp-post."

"Re-ally !"

Even Sir Thomas shivered.

"Now, I suffer from sleeplessness, m'lady."

Aunt Agatha gazed at the ceiling as she said :

"Have you never tried talking to yourself, Hogan ?"

Whereupon Hogan went from the room with the tray and the bottle of thinning mixture, hoping in his loyal heart that the next drop would choke her.

Sir Thomas fretted.

"I'm sorry you spoke like that to Hogan, Agatha," he said. "He is a faithful old servant."

"And I don't know how you tolerate him, Thomas," she retorted. "Him and that wretched sniff of his."

"That sniff, as you call it, Agatha," said Sir Thomas, chidingly, "is the result of a wound on the field of battle. He has been with me twenty-five years, and we haven't had a cross word." And, sensing an opening for the real business, he warned them again that they must expect to leave the house since Reginald had failed them.

Phoebe was rather fine in that moment : she appeared suddenly to grasp the truth of the situation, for she went up to Sir Thomas and put her arm around his neck.

"Old soldiers don't get their tails down, pater," she said. "Now that we know the ghastly truth we'll get into thick boots and red flannels. I'll feed chickens and milk cows. Any old thing."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

It was the sort of lead the two older women were awaiting. Lady Shadrow—bless her dear soul!—was ready to face the broken road at once. Aunt Agatha, whose fragmentary fortune, foolishly invested, brought in just sufficient to pay her “reducing” bills, insisted that where “Dear Virginia” went she would go. If disaster had come they must face it bravely. After all, the whole country was on the verge of bankruptcy. It was no disgrace to be poor, however uncomfortable it might be.

Then Harold, the solon, drifted in from his study at the top of the house, a departmental book in his hands, his hair ruffled, his eyes sleepy of expression. Harold was born between midnight and dawn and he had never succeeded in catching up the lost hours of sleep. Nothing seemed capable of arousing him from the abstraction in which he buried himself. During the War he served in a rather fashionable regiment but should have been shot for sleeping under the guns during a barrage. Harold, tall and weedy, would have done no more than nod if the hangman had tapped him on the shoulder and advised him that the fun was about to begin. He spoke slowly and petulantly and without expecting an answer or a comment. Very thin, he gave the impression of suffering from constitutional weakness, but that was erroneous. Harold’s whole exterior was a mask: he might have made an excellent addition to the Secret Intelligence Department or the ranks of Comedians whose strong suit is lugubriousness. As he came into the room he lifted his gaze from the government blue book and addressed his father:

“I say, pater,” he drawled, “do you realize that in nineteen eighteen we owed eight thousand millions? And that we have to pay the jolly old Yankees thirty-five millions a year in interest alone?” He pushed the straying hair back from his forehead and lit a cigarette.

Phoebe spoke for the crowd.

NOTES ON THE SHADROW FAMILY

"A mere flea-bite, Harold," she said. "We owe about six thousand, so pull yourself together and help us out of the mess."

He lowered his book and looked inquiringly at his father.

"Your brother Reginald is on his way home," said Sir Thomas.

"Tophole," said Harold, turning back to his book. "He may be in time for the Eton-Harrow match."

"And he's returning like the prodigal son," said Phoebe. "All husks and no kernels. He hasn't a bean."

Harold closed his book with a helpless gesture.

"But I thought that was why he went to the States," he said. "To get money—what?" Again, he opened the book and addressed his father: "Of course, we'll jolly soon knock off that eight thousand millions if only Labour will put its back into it—what?"

Sir Thomas's face was inexpressibly sad and old.

"We leave Highfield Court almost immediately, Harold," he said, and paused because his lips were twitching foolishly. He added: "How long will it take you to get your personal belongings together?"

The voice reached Harold through the narrow end of a megaphone.

"Oh, you toddle along without me, pater," he said tiredly, and lifted the book of statistics closer to his thin nose.

That was Harold. And it was a long while before they were able to convey to his mind even an inkling of the true state of affairs: then, he was content to leave everything to them. He went back to his room and resumed his studies.

It was in these circumstances that the family awaited the arrival of Reginald. There was only one thin hope percolating through the mind of Sir Thomas. There had been talk of a marriage between Reginald and Lady Muriel Fratton; that was before he set out to divorce dollars from their native owners. Lady Muriel still

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

called on the Shadrows because she had no knowledge of the holes in the heel of the family stocking. And recently Lady Muriel had inherited the estate of an uncle. Since Reginald had always yielded to force of argument, it wasn't to be doubted that he would agree to any course which might save the dignity of the house.

During the next two hours of that day, the Shadrows trembled under the shock of blows. The mortgagee blew in like a tempest and joyed in his opportunity to heap contumely on the traditions of the family. Hogan, the faithful, was quite willing and ready to become a homicide, but Sir Thomas felt the necessity hadn't yet arisen.

The severest blow was at the spirit of Romance. It came from the effeminate Mr. Oswald Carter, fiancé of Phoebe. Now, she was very young though sophisticated, and, perhaps, somewhere there is a laurel wreath awaiting her for the courage she displayed on this occasion. Carter's people had voyaged cabin de luxe with William of Normandy when that bright opportunist crossed the Channel to exchange pleasantries with Harold at Hastings. The Carters had learned a little of the true state of affairs at Highfield Court and were taking no chances. Oswald was shown into the reception-room and Phoebe joined him there: her relations appeared to realize that this was a problem she must solve for herself.

Rather nervous and effeminate, he began:

"I say, old girl, just heard the beastly news and toddled along at once."

"Awfully good of you," said Phoebe, reading the shallow mind intuitively.

"How rotten for you," said Carter looking out of the window. "The mater was awfully sick about it. You know? Rather lets us down—what?"

"I suppose so," said Phoebe, affecting casualness. "Lucky thing the engagement wasn't announced last month."

NOTES ON THE SHADROW FAMILY

Carter was relieved. Already she realized that the marriage was unthinkable.

"That's sporting of you," said he. "Mind, I'm all for it if you are. Say the word, and I'll tell the mater we simply must go on with it."

Phoebe said: "Oh, no. Don't do anything of the sort."

"By Jove, you do take a sporting view of it."

"It's rather a relief in some respects," said Phoebe, nothing like tears in her eyes.

He was hurt—actually.

"You don't mean that," he protested.

Rather bitterly she inquired:

"Do you or I or anyone these days mean what we say?"

He floundered. There was something contemptuous in her attitude.

"Of course, if there's anything I can do," he ventured; then he stopped.

"The kindest thing you could do for me," said Phoebe, "would be to forget."

They shook hands. He walked to the door: there he made the mistake of indulging a platitude:

"You know, Phoebe, it's all very well for the cynics to speak slightly of the modern girl, but she does know how to face misfortune—what?"

"Don't drip—there's a good chap," said Phoebe. She added listlessly: "Cheerio!" Then the door closed on him. That romance was ended. She went back to the family gathering.

Two positively poisonous hours. Everybody's nerves on edge. Hopes crushed. Faces turned to the wall. Lady Shadrow smiling in order to hide her tears. Aunt Agatha roundly contemning Hogan for getting in her way. Sir Thomas pacing to and fro like a lion in a cage.

Then came a most unusual sound from the direction of the drive. The rumbling of heavy wheels on the gravel. Like a hearse coming along slowly to pick up

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

the body. Or the bailiff's van arriving to take the furniture. The members of the family were gathered again in the study and each one flung up the head and caught at the breath. Phoebe was the first to recover herself. She ran to the window, gave one glance, then shrieked with delight.

Reginald, the prodigal, had arrived!

He didn't wait for door to be unfastened. Phoebe had opened the french-windows of the study and he leaped into the room. A small, whimsical, dark-haired fellow two years younger than the long and bony Harold. Rather snub-nosed; nostrils seeming to stare like a second pair of eyes. He was excited and tumultuous. He might have been the bearer of an open cheque on the Bank of England. He wasn't. He saw his mother and flung himself into her outstretched arms without the slightest regard for dignity and good form. He hugged Phoebe and Aunt Agatha, slapped Hogan on the back, and swung round on Harold.

"Hello, old thing! How goes it?"

"Rotten," said Harold slowly. "Had any cricket where you've been?"

Then the family spread itself into a semi-circle and Sir Thomas began:

"My boy, welcome home. Circumstances compel me to beat down pride and ask, rather vulgarly, if—if you have triumphed over—over adversity? We had your wire, but—but hope springs eternal, and that sort of thing."

Reggie was pathetically dull of comprehension. His mother whispered timidly:

"Have you succeeded, my darling, where so many others have failed?"

Reggie was blinking like a cat in the sun.

"Mater," said he, "give it to me in English."

Phoebe obliged, for her knowledge was extensive.

"Have you 'clicked', Reggie? Have you brought back any 'doings'?"

NOTES ON THE SHADROW FAMILY

That was better.

"Not a bean," said Reginald and smiled vacantly. Their question might have been a joke which he didn't quite assimilate.

In the silence that followed, the ticking of an ormolu clock on the mantelshelf sounded to them like the hammering of a creditor's fist on the door. Then Aunt Agatha asked of nobody in particular how they could have expected more of Reginald. The implication was that if they had sent the family cat to the States it would have earned at least its milk.

Sir Thomas felt his dignity sloughing from him; in a few hours' time he would have to confess that his rank couldn't bring them a shoestring if they hadn't money to back it up. He asked Reginald, rather curtly, what were his intentions, gave him no time to reply, told him of the predicament in which they were placed, sighed that Lady Muriel might have made an admirable wife, wondered what the world would think and say when it learned that the house of Shadrow hadn't a roof over its head, and finished up by recalling that telegram from Southampton. Yes . . . oh yes! What was the nature of the "wrinkles" by which he was filled?

Reginald smiled again. He looked very small and uncommonly like a clown as he stood there in the middle of the room. Phoebe, the most sentimental of them all, in spite of her modern ways, felt rather sorry for him; she sidled near him and grasped his hand.

"Say your piece, Reggie," she prompted.

And he began:

"It was really Sadie who gave me the bright idea when I was dish-washing in a hot-dog wagon." As their brows furrowed in wonderment, hot-dog wagons being unfamiliar to them, his face expanded. "Good Lord," he exclaimed. "I'd forgotten Sadie!"

He turned on his heel, leaped towards the open french-windows, looked down the drive, and yelled in a tongue that was utterly foreign to them:

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"C'mon, Sadie! Attababy! Oh, she's the berries! I'll tell the world! Drive 'em, kid—drive 'em!"

The family bit hard on its overdraft and waited for the reply. It came. First the rumbling of wheels, then the crack of a whip, and lastly, a girl's voice:

“Oh, you Reggie, you! So this is the li’le ol’ roof-tree?”

Although it was late afternoon, the sun aroused itself for a minute and focused the open windows. The traditional ghosts of the Shadrows leaned down from the ceiling corners and stared. A caravan, drawn by a couple of well-fed horses, halted in the drive. A young girl, with hair the colour of ripening wheat blowing about her forehead, flung the reins over the backs of the animals and jumped nimbly down to where the diminutive Reggie was waiting to catch her. They came into the room, holding hands and smiling as to say: “We thought you’d be surprised.”

Reggie might have found this young nymph on the edge of a creek, splashing about in the sedge, or peeping through the undergrowth to see that nobody stole her flimsy clothes. That last flash of the sun had remained in her eyes, fascinated by the glint of devilry in them. Her cheeks had rubbed against the apples in the orchards along the country roads which the caravan had travelled. She was still holding Reggie’s hand when she came to attention in the middle of the room and braved the battery of critical and wondering looks.

“Folk,” said Reggie, bowing like a ringmaster, “I want you to meet Sadie.”

Aunt Agatha had dropped on a divan so heavily and with such suddenness that she wouldn’t be able to rise without assistance. Sir Thomas had bidden a swift farewell to every one of his patron saints, believing no longer in their sustaining qualities. Harold wiped his spectacles and said “Really!” Phoebe had half-closed one eye the better to elucidate a problem that was worrying her. Lady Shadrow, sweet as ever, went forward to the new arrival.

NOTES ON THE SHADOW FAMILY

"My dear," she said, "if you are a friend of my boy, you are welcome—doubly welcome."

Then came a rush of questions, mostly from Sir Thomas who brushed dignity aside. He wanted to *know*. And Reggie endeavoured to tell him, aided, here and there, by Sadie. They had eloped from Philadelphia. Yeah. Her father was a big noise in pork, just as Sir Thomas feared. But it was good pork. Reggie had to admit that, although the self-made man had no respect for Reggie and had sternly discountenanced the friendship between his daughter and the dish-washer.

Sir Thomas leaned heavily on Harold's arm as he stormed :

"You ! Washing dishes. Why ?"

And the poor human fish could think of no better reason than that he was hungry and just had to do something. He looked down at the little hand he was holding and smiled reminiscently.

"Sadie used to come to the wagon to cheer me up—didn't you ?" he said.

And Sadie nodded.

"Sure. And saw that the customers didn't get fresh and 'gyp' you. Eh, baby ?" She snuggled a little closer to him, much to the mental hurt of his father.

When he had recovered his breath, Sir Thomas asked the young lady if she was aware that Lady Muriel was in the field and that Lady Muriel happened to be the family's choice. She was. What did it matter ; she loved Reggie ; they had eloped, braving the wrath of her male parent in Philadelphia ; they had managed to cross the Atlantic and had been subjected to much inconvenience by inquisitive immigration officers. But it had been splendid fun.

Eloped. They looked like a couple of school children who had played truant.

Sir Thomas stared curiously at Sadie. He appeared to be wondering how she had happened. Reggie understood.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Only daughter of Hiram B. Jolson, Philadelphia, Pa.," said he.

Sir Thomas tilted his beard a little as he inquired :

"Is your father a professional man ?"

Sadie thought for a second. Then :

"Waal, I told you he was in pigs, but he's sitting pretty now."

Harold said : "By Jove", as though she were a distinctly new ethnological specimen.

Aunt Agatha shot one over :

"Did he approve of this—this elopement ?"

Sadie laughed at the absurdness of the question.

"I'll say he didn't," she replied. "He'd go 'bugs' if he knew."

"'Bugs' ?" Harold murmured.

"Crazy," Reggie interpreted. "You'll have to get wise to Sadie's slang ; it's positively priceless."

"Thanks," said Harold in a far-away voice as he moved back from the group.

"Do you mean to say that you travelled alone?" said Aunt Agatha.

"Oh, no," said Sadie ; "the ship was full."

"And possibly there were English people on board," Sir Thomas said, apprehensively.

"Quite a few," Reggie agreed. "You'd have thought they owned the damned ship. Your friend, Sir William Titpot, was there—the old snob."

"Sir William! My God!"

"Yes, and he gave us the frozen mitt—didn't he, Sadie ?"

"He sure did," said Sadie, "and he could have helped us quite a bit when the immigration mutts began to put on 'dog' and ask questions."

Horror on horror. Sir Thomas and Aunt Agatha felt the mud of scandal creeping up to their necks.

"Thomas," she wailed, "let me go to my room and wake up from this dreadful nightmare." She buried her face in the hair of Wung and sobbed hysterically.

NOTES ON THE SHADOW FAMILY

Phoebe was chuckling softly. For her the real fun was just beginning.

Sir Thomas braced his shoulders and addressed the little blonde.

"Young lady," said he, frigidly. "I don't know what there may be between you and my son, but I would like you to understand that the Shadrows have lived in this county for hundreds of years."

"And Sir Thomas," Aunt Agatha supplemented, "is a baronet whose name stands for all that is meant by dignity."

Reggie flung out his hands desperately.

"But look here, pater——"

Aunt Agatha's cold voice went on:

"And in the churchyard nearby you will find the tombstones of Shadrows who ruled some centuries ago."

"But, pater——" Reggie was ignoring his aunt.

"Let Reggie say his piece," said Phoebe with some show of impatience.

There was a lull in the storm.

"Very well," said Sir Thomas resignedly.

Reggie's mouth opened and shut. He resembled a small boy trying to remember his "lines" at a school concert. The laughter went out of his eyes. He clutched at Sadie's hand and——

"Dam' it, I've forgotten what I learned to say," he confessed at last. "You spill it, Sadie."

That which followed would have been pure burlesque and appreciated as such if the family nerves had been steadier. The elopers had anticipated this heckling and during the voyage from New York they had framed, even written, speeches they should make in defence. Sadie took a step forward when she was called on, threw back her head defiantly and addressed Sir Thomas. Reggie took from his pocket the written speech and made ready to prompt her if she should "dry up", as the actors say.

"You've got it into your head," said Sadie, "that

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

I'm a gold-digger, a four-flusher, and that I've vamped mamma's boy just to nose my way into the family. I haven't. I'm just an honest-to-God hundred per cent. American girl. When I first met Reggie he was all through——"

She faltered. Reggie prompted:

"'He hadn't lost his courage'——"

She took a breather and nodded gratefully.

"He hadn't lost his courage," she went on, "but he was a poor sap——"

Another interruption.

"'Sap' ? 'Sap' ?" Sir Thomas echoed, perplexedly.

Reggie shook his shoulders irritably.

"Skip that bit, Sadie," he suggested. "'He was without friends'——"

"He was without friends," Sadie intoned and now her gaze was fixed on the ceiling. "And being a poor sap——"

Reggie rustled the paper in his hand.

"Don't stress the 'sap', baby," he said peevishly.

Very well, she wouldn't, and without explaining to the mystified audience that a sap was a simpleton, she went on in quicker time:

"Being a boob and good-natured, he was likely to be picked on, if you get my meaning. You see, in my country they don't give a dead cat for a man who lives on what his people may have done for the Crown or the White House. They say: 'Yes, old son, but you deliver the goods or get to hell outta here.'"

Aunt Agatha made a frantic grab at her net bag and groped for smelling salts. Lady Shadrow held a delicate hand to her lips; Harold turned away with the remark that the language was positively new to him though his knowledge of Spanish suggested that she was half Mexican—probably from Tia Juana. Only Phoebe, the flapper whom nobody in that house understood, leaned forward and showed intelligent interest. Phoebe, being young, scented a real romance.

NOTES ON THE SHADOW FAMILY

"Why—why did you help him in that hot-dog wagon?" she asked.

And Sadie answered naïvely :

"Because I loved him."

The confession fetched a deep sigh out of the bowels of Sir Thomas.

Harold wiped the lenses of his large reading spectacles and sought a definition of "hot-dog wagon". Was it a night-club?

Sadie explained that it was a coffee stall de luxe, that a "hot-dog" was a Frankfurter sausage set by the ears between two slices of bread. She added that she inspired Reggie with the belief that one day he might own a "chain" of wagons that would stretch from Florida to Portland, Maine.

Aunt Agatha said : "What?"

Sadie replied plaintively : "He'd have cleaned up a million dollars."

Aunt Agatha said, again : "What?"

"That is," said Sadie, "if he'd forgotten his traditions, seeing that they didn't show a profit."

Another silence that seemed to double the family overdraft. Then, from the hollow stomach of Sir Thomas whose mind was swinging backward :

"Washing dishes! My God! A Shadow washing dishes in a dog kennel!"

Reggie was horribly sentimental in that moment.

"Yes," said the sap, looking at nothing, "and Sadie was dam' sorry for me when I'd done an extra dose of washing for Ricci, the Greek, who ran the wagon. She used to take the crinkles out of my fingers." He looked at Phoebe as though she alone were capable of understanding how hot water and soda crinkled the cuticle of the fingers. "You know? The crinkles. She took them out."

"How?" asked Phoebe, clinging desperately to that vision of Romance.

Sadie answered her rather shyly. She felt for Reggie's

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

hand and rubbed the tips of his fingers against her lips.

"Just holding his hand—like this," she said.

Harold dropped his spectacles; Aunt Agatha would have sworn if she had known any swear words; Sir Thomas gave Reggie a look that would have frozen a leg of mutton; and Reggie—Reggie smiled insanely and said:

"And we got a big idea one morning just when I'd made up my mind to choke myself with a Frankfurter sausage. I was hesitating——"

"Why?" asked Harold solemnly.

"Suddenly," said Reggie, "Sadie discovered what I lacked."

From Aunt Agatha came the thunder:

"If you had given her your home address we could have enlightened her earlier."

Phoebe hurled herself to the rescue.

"What did you lack?" she asked.

"Dignity," said Harold, gloomily.

"Respect for the traditions of the Shadrows," said Aunt Agatha, and snapped her lips together as though she had caught a fly in her mouth.

"No," said Reggie with an access of courage, "what I lacked was guts."

Aunt Agatha said "Oh," and looked at Sadie as though she hoped that she hadn't heard, or didn't understand the expression.

Lady Shadrow, his mother, moved forward a pace to set a restraining hand on his forearm.

"No, my dear," she said. "Sadie discovered that you lacked a sense of responsibility. That's all. The natural thing for a boy to lack."

"No backbone, you mean," said Sir Thomas.

Now, it may have been coincidence, or fate, but at that moment there was a dramatic interruption. Unknown to everybody save Sir Thomas himself, the mortgagee, one Simeon Grossett, was sitting in a small

NOTES ON THE SHADROW FAMILY

ante-room just behind the study. He had been asked by the head of the house to wait until the hope, or fool, of the family returned. He had become impatient. He was surfeited with excuses. He was drenched with promises and sick of unfulfilment. Grossett burst into the room where the family temper was beginning to ferment. He was a short, unshapely man with social ambitions and a suburban chin. He had no vocabulary to speak of but he carried a whole dictionary in his attitude. His face was red and unattractive; his voice was hoarse and threatening; his shoulders were as broad as his language.

"Nah, look 'ere," said he, facing Sir Thomas and ignoring the rest of the company. "I've had enough of titled gents. I've tried to be decent abaght things, but I'm fed up to the top teeth. Get a move on."

The effect on the company would have appealed to a psychologist. Sir Thomas bit his nether lip; Lady Shadrow pressed her hands to her bosom and smiled encouragingly at her husband (she knew what he was suffering); Harold said: "By Jove!" Phoebe tightened her lips and there was just a suspicion of tears in her eyes.

Sadie, who was acquainted with all the circumstances (for she and Reggie had learned by letter from the mother, at Southampton, how things stood), turned to Reggie, he who lacked backbone according to Sir Thomas. And Sadie said casually:

"Reggie, give him the air."

Translated broadly that meant: "Give him a hook under the chin, kick him out of the room, drop him on his back anywhere outside."

Reggie did it all. He was a good workman when he took his orders from the little Philadelphia peanut.

When he returned to the group, wiping his hands on his trousers as he came, he said:

"There wasn't much bite in that one, Sadie. Nothing like the rough-necks we had to handle in Greenwich

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Village. 'Member the wop we doped with the pepper castor. What?' He was short of breath but the light of triumph shone in his eyes.

Sir Thomas, justice of the peace, was clasping and unclasping his hands. The last vestige of dignity had been ruthlessly torn from the house. In the room where the ghosts of dead and gone Shadrows were covering their eyes in horror, a Shadrow of another type had indulged the spirit of common brawling. The mortgagee, admittedly of humble origin, would spread the devastating news that the family belonged to a tribe of hooligans and cut-throats. Sir Thomas's eyes bulged; his cheeks were the colour of faded hydrangea bloom—purple and sickly white; his lips moved pathetically.

Sadie dared to rest a hand on his shaking shoulder. She was aware of the tumult in his aristocratic mind.

"Say it with music," she advised, "and leave the rest to Reggie. Pop, I've trained that hick to the minute. A little more bone in his chassis and I'd have fixed him for a Madison Square Garden slam. Even now he'd go ten rounds with some of the lop ears who are pulling down a hundred dollars for a slapping exhibition. Don't worry about your dignity; there's a moment in everybody's life when a rap in the slats takes the kitty while good manners is still looking at the foul hand it's been dealt."

"Is the poor man dead?" Lady Shadrow whispered. Phoebe tiptoed to the veranda and peeped over the balcony rail to the drive.

"It's all right," she called back; "he's moving."

Sir Thomas called plaintively to Harold:

"Go out and placate him."

"Really, pater, I'd rather leave it to Reggie," said Harold. "Of course, this puts the jolly old tin hat on everything."

The door was opened cautiously and to their amazement Mr. Simeon Grossett looked in. There wasn't a

NOTES ON THE SHADROW FAMILY

trace of vindictiveness on his fat red face. Indeed, he grinned and held out a hand to Reggie.

"Put it there," he said, admiringly, "I was in the cauliflower ear business myself once so I know what I'm talking about. You've got the punch, me lad, and the prettiest right hook I've come across. Once a sport, allus a sport—that's me." He paused a second to stare at Sir Thomas. "Did you send for him to give me a packet?" he asked. "All right—" as Sir Thomas raised a hand in protest—"you go all the same. I'll give you till next week—what?" And he shuffled out of the room.

CHAPTER III

NEEDS MUST WHEN THE DEVIL DRIVES

THE family conference lasted until long after midnight. There was no evading the crisis. Titles are only hindrances when they have nothing more than tradition behind them. As Sadie argued, it isn't the title that counts with the multitude so much as the assumption that there's money in the background. Plant a coronet on the head of an indigent rag picker and you make him a foil for every wit, even though that coronet has come down the ages to him from the time when the avaricious James of England was dealing in baronetcies.

Reginald, the prodigal, had absorbed a good deal of horse-sense during his exile among the Democrats. It takes only a few weeks of shuffling in the bread-line of New York to learn the difference between a five-dollar bill and a roll of parchment that sets forth what your ancestors did at the battle of Hastings. There's no snob like a true democrat, but when he kneels before his idol he likes to know the feet are not all clay.

When Reginald first hit the Great White Way which is Broadway, he fancied he had only to mention that his father was a baronet and the Statue of Liberty would drop her upstage attitude in the Hudson River, climb down with her torch and come along to show him the sights. When he realized that even in a supposedly rich democratic country he had to eat to live, pay to eat, and work for the money with which to pay, he felt as full of knowledge as a public library. He couldn't trade even his English accent for a dish of Chop Suey.

It wasn't that Reginald lacked the quality of sympathy when he refused to weep with the head of the family.

NEEDS MUST WHEN DEVIL DRIVES

It was only because hard bumps on a hard road had toughened up his sense of values. In his heart there was deep affection for Highfield Court; his boyhood days had been passed in the house and grounds. The den on the top floor which he had shared with Harold was still littered with the paraphernalia that belongs to the dreams of adventurous youth. There was the look-out for merchantment that might replenish their piratical coffers. In a corner, covered with dust, were the air-guns they had used to pepper the seat of the gardener's pants when he was stooping to his toil in the moat garden. That moat, itself, represented a whole world. Reginald was familiar with every inch of its surface and most of its bottom, for there never was a quarrel between him and Harold, on the raft, that didn't end in one of them going overboard. On the walls of the den were the dried skins of stoats and weasels. Crazy-looking home-made aeroplanes were suspended from the ceiling. The parachute that he and Harold made had its place of honour in the museum, and its history, written by Phoebe and pinned on the fabric, informed the beholder that it was the identical contraption which Harold had used at the instigation of his brother, in descending from the roof of Highfield Court: a rude, yet kindly wind had blown him out of the perpendicular, so that he fell in the moat. Oh, there were hundreds of memories that Reginald cherished about the old homestead, but among other lessons he had assimilated in America was that sentiment may be an expensive thing to support.

Sir Thomas Shadrow was touching bottom with his feet: Reginald knew that his father was still clinging to the absurd fallacy that Society wouldn't allow a baronet of his proud lineage to be submerged in the waters of bankruptcy: Reginald knew that Society was quite prepared to expunge the name of Shadrow from its memory rather than foot a bill. Sir Thomas was still gazing at life through the veil of self-importance:

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Reginald wasn't disposed to bank a bad sixpence on the chances of Society—even the Society of Baronets appointed to protect the honour of the Order, or Patent—coming to the rescue. It was all very illogical, yet very sane to Reginald. A titled man might get into trouble through assisting a political leader and yet be able to count on the sympathy and aid of every other title; but let him get into poverty and he was damned as surely as a leper.

The Shadrow treasury was so empty that they could have heard a grain of barley rattling in it. The farmhands of the estate had long since been disposed of; increasing taxation since the War had eaten into capital; there had been several foolishly-inspired ventures into litigation when the Shadrow dignity had been menaced; and Sir Thomas was a dawdler—perhaps that was the root and branch of the whole tree of evil.

The family conference was held behind locked doors; even Hogan wasn't privy to it. The fear that the outside world might learn the truth lay heavily on Sir Thomas, who was sufficiently an ostrich to hope that he had only to bury his head in the sand to escape the contumely of Society.

"I might borrow a few thousands to tide us over," he said, tentatively.

Reginald deliberately winked at Sadie, then fixed his gaze on a vagrant fly.

"Ghee, Sadie," he observed, "I wish I could walk on a ceiling like that. I'd make big money."

Sir Thomas rebuked him.

"Your great-grandfather, Sir Geoffrey, owned fifteen thousand acres, sir," he said stiffly.

"Maybe," said Reginald, "but he couldn't walk on a ceiling."

"No, I'll lay he couldn't do that," said Sadie, doubtfully. "There was a guy in my home town pushed a peanut twenty miles with his nose, but I reckon he'd have been punk at ceiling walking."

NEEDS MUST WHEN DEVIL DRIVES

Harold yawned behind his hand.

"Remarkable we haven't thought of that till now," he said to his father.

"Ceiling walking?" said Sir Thomas, and his voice would have cut a swede turnip in halves.

"No, borrowing a few thousands," said Harold, and yawned again.

"From whom?" asked Aunt Agatha. "Friends?"

"Certainly not," said Phoebe. "That would expose our hand."

"What about the Jews?" said Harold. "I fancy I've seen advertisements of the sort."

"It would be dreadfully distasteful to me," said Sir Thomas, "but I suppose they'd feel flattered." He braced himself with a reflection. "The title goes back to seventeen twenty, Harold."

"Seventeen twenty-two," said the family historian. Sir Thomas bowed acknowledgment of the correction.

"Four thousand would be ample to stem the tide," he mused, "but if we can sink our prejudices and go to the Jews we might as well take ten."

"Why not fifty thousand?" Reginald suggested. "There's the caravan to bring it home."

Sir Thomas looked at Harold; Harold looked at his mother; Lady Shadrow looked at Reginald and murmured, "Dear Reggie, we are seeking your help."

"I'm offering it, mother," said the prodigal.

"Well, why not borrow from these Jews?" said Sir Thomas, almost fiercely.

"No reason why you shouldn't," said Reginald, "but how are you going to repay?"

"Oh, that," said Harold disappointedly. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Nor does anyone else when they talk of going to the professionals," said Reginald, sententiously.

"They're not bad scouts, are they?" asked Phoebe. "Give them their due, if we are prejudiced in favour of Gentiles."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"That's an English proverb, isn't it," said Sadie. "Give the devil his Jew?"

"You've said it, babe," said Reginald. He looked at his father. "The worst of borrowing is that you're expected to pay it back," he said. "You have no other proposition?"

"I have friends," said Sir Thomas, desperately.

"The best friends you have, father," said Reginald, "are gathered here in this room. Let the mortgagee foreclose; let the furniture be stored before the creditors can jump in; let's go while the going's good."

"Where?" asked Harold sleepily.

"America," said Phoebe.

"It's a long wet walk," said Reginald.

Hogan knocked at the door.

Sir Thomas called out nervously: "Well, Hogan?"

Reginald began to take off his coat.

"Lead with the left, hook with the right, and keep your chin down on your shoulder, buddy," said Sadie.

Sir Thomas unlocked the door.

"You should be in bed, Hogan," he said.

"Lucky thing I wasn't, sir," said Hogan. "Sir Godfrey Slimm is in the drawing-room. He was passing and saw the lights. He knows it's very late, but he wanted to have a word with you, sir. Sir Godfrey has been to a meeting of the Hunt Committee."

"I'll be with Sir Godfrey immediately," said Sir Thomas and every wrinkle in his face was laughing in triumph. He swung around to the members of the family. "Now, we'll put friendship to the test," said he. "My old friend Slimm. He must be worth half a million."

He went off to the drawing-room. He greeted Sir Godfrey effusively.

"Late? Not a bit of it. Always glad to see you, Slimm."

Sir Godfrey laughed heartily.

"I know you are," he said. "I intended to call on

NEEDS MUST WHEN DEVIL DRIVES

you to-morrow morning, but we may be pressed for time. How are things with you? Financially, I mean? These dam' taxes——"

"They're worrying me dreadfully," said Sir Thomas, grateful to heaven for the friendly lead. Now he could leap in without undue loss of pride.

"Same here," said Sir Godfrey. "You can't afford to finance people—can you? No, of course not. Lady Slimm and I are clearing out to-morrow. Going abroad. Fed up with these damned cadgers who think that because they bought a title when they were flush they are privileged in demanding loans when they're down and out. I hate the type; don't you?"

"In past years I have given thousands to charity," said Sir Thomas timorously, yet hopefully. "I find it impossible to give anything nowadays. In fact I—I almost wish I could reclaim some of that very charity."

"Exactly," said Sir Godfrey. "That's what I say when they come whining for a paltry loan. I should have been firmer in the past."

Sir Thomas felt that his guns had been spiked by the reference to "damned cadgers", but he visualized the delicate Lady Shadrow actually in want and plucked up courage to take another step.

"In fact, if I could get back a tithe of what I've given away I should feel a happy man."

"Exactly," said Sir Godfrey again. "That's what I say to these damned fellows who sit on my doorstep. 'Who's to blame for your position?' I ask them. 'You put this dam' Party into power and now you howl when they tax the boots off your feet. But they're absolutely irresponsible, Shadrow. They don't tell you about their extravagances when they come to see you.'"

"No," said Sir Thomas faintly, and repeated the word again and again. "No . . . No . . . No. They don't."

Sir Godfrey buttoned his raincoat and patted himself on the chest.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Well, good-bye, Shadrow. Couldn't leave without saying a word. My regards to Lady Shadrow and the family."

He was out and away before Sir Thomas could frame the request. Perhaps, if he could have read the mind of the visitor, his own position might have been made more tenable.

"Hell to him," Sir Godfrey thought. "He got in first with his reference to the charities. I couldn't ask him for a bean after that. Shouldn't have got it if I had asked. Cunning old swine. Thank God, the Chancellor won't be long in getting a bite out of the Death Duties. The poisonous old blighter! Shouldn't wonder if he *really* goes abroad till the country recovers."

Sir Thomas returned to the family conference.

They asked no questions.

"Now, Reginald," he said with forced lightness, "if you have a wrinkle let's have it. Don't let's stand on ceremony."

"There's the caravan," said Reginald.

"It wouldn't fetch a couple of pounds," said Harold.

"It's a home from home," said Reginald. "Sadie and I bought it between us. She wants to see England; and you, my dear pater, if you'll forgive the impertinence, *should* see it. The weather's glorious."

"How vulgar." Aunt Agatha groaned.

"Even if it were feasible," said Sir Thomas, "there's your mother."

Sadie went across to Lady Shadrow and said gently:

"I know that you'd love it. We'd look after you every minute. Regard it as a holiday."

"In a caravan," said Aunt Agatha, contemptuously.

"We call it The House With the Golden Windows," said Sadie, ignoring the interjection. "The sun is never shut out—we just turn the ol' wagon around to invite it in."

"We can't stay here," Sir Thomas said gloomily.

NEEDS MUST WHEN DEVIL DRIVES

"Of course not," said Reginald. "Every day here means an addition to the debts. We're going to look for work."

"Work?" Harold echoed.

"You bet we are," said Sadie. "And the big kick in the soft drink is that we're going to give Sir Thomas's friends the notion that we've gone on tour in the interests of literature or any darned thing that sounds 'ritzy'." She turned to Reginald. "Have I said it, Honey?"

"One mouthful, babe," said Reginald.

Aunt Agatha fetched a sigh of hopelessness.

"I couldn't sleep in a thing like that," she said, resolutely.

"You needn't," said Sadie. "We have plenty of tents. Gosh! You should see us camp out on Bear Mountain in the States."

Hogan came into the room. There was the guilty smile of the eavesdropper on his thin, hatchet face.

"I've locked all the doors," said he, addressing Sir Thomas.

Reginald said: "Hogan, we're going on the road—all of us. Fact is, I've persuaded Sir Thomas to accept my invitation to join in a very merry tour. What do you think of it?"

"Boloney," said Hogan, with unexpected pertness.

"Bol—what?" said Harold.

"He thinks we're fooling him," said Reginald.

"Hogan has no right to think at all," said Harold haughtily.

"You'll come with us, Hogan," said Reginald. "Can't do without you."

"I'll be glad to come," said Hogan. He straightened himself. A new world opened before his eyes in that moment. Yes, they would want him to go. They'd need a human camel, sure enough, and he could make a pretty shrewd guess at the camel's name. "Glad to come," he repeated, and slowly his gaze travelled to

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Wung, the Pekingese, curled up on Aunt Agatha's knee. "Do we take that dam' thing with us?" he asked.

Reginald walked to the door.

"I'd like to speak to you in the next room, Hogan," he said, and led the way out. He was removing his coat as he went.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOUSE WITH THE GOLDEN WINDOWS

THE week that followed seemed shorter than a day; there was much to do and so many possibilities to consider. Sir Thomas, as he unstrapped his "gear" for the fourteenth time at the bidding of Reginald, the supervisor, observed that he was beginning to understand why there were only two short periods of consequence in a working-man's week—Saturday night when he was free from toil, and Monday morning when he had to resume it.

When The House With the Golden Windows was brought around for inspection, even the lackadaisical Harold worked up sufficient interest in it to inquire why they didn't fix a trailer in order to convey his books. Eventually this was done, but not in the interest of literature. Aunt Agatha conceded to the green and yellow conveyance, with its crudely carved canopy over the driver's seat, its quaintly-fashioned halved door at the back, natty little flight of steps from the ground, pots of flowering plants swinging from the roof—she conceded that the affair certainly held the spice of novelty and might satisfy their society friends that they were "originals" when it came to devising a holiday, but—

Where was the bath and hot and cold water? And the wardrobes? And the electric reading-lamps? And how could they all find sleeping quarters within its compass? She was allowed to ask all these questions without interruption. Lady Shadrow saved the others a deal of breath by whispering to her sister-in-law: "It's only a pleasant little joke on the part of Reggie to give his father's mind a respite from worry. Think of it as a

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

picnic, my dear : it will be something to talk about when we get back to-morrow, or the next day."

The trailer had to be improvised from an old farm hay wagon : a tarpaulin canopy had been constructed to cover the necessary baggage, bell tents, and such tools and implements as might be essential.

Within The House With the Golden Windows there were only two sleeping bunks and Sadie had arrogated to herself the right to treat one of them with a semblance of artistry. It was to belong to the delicate Lady Shadrow. The other bunk was confiscated by Phoebe.

Very cunning and compact was the rest of the embellishment of the caravan : a folding wash-basin, a writing-table that could be taken to pieces in a few seconds and slipped at night under the sleeping bunk, a wicker chair, a "wardrobe" composed of half a dozen hooks and a green velvet curtain, a footstool that opened like a box and held a score of useful articles—thread, wool, buttons and similar essentials.

Aunt Agatha agreed that it was most ingeniously contrived, but where was she going to sleep ? Nobody told her, but they all knew.

It was a momentous week financially. Unpaid debts have long and susceptible ears : they take fright at the slightest sound of a prisoner effecting his escape. Even the village baker called in person to inquire if he might continue to supply them in the holiday resort to which they were going, and, if not, could they oblige him with a cheque in settlement as his rent was falling due.

Long before the end of the week of preparation for flight, Sir Thomas was brought to realize that respect for title and tradition sickens of a fever when it fears its bills will not be met. The importunities of local tradesmen threw him into a frenzy in the early part of the week. He swore to high heaven that when he recovered his throne he would oust every damned one of them. The swine ! The swine ! The fawning sycophantic swine ! Whining for their pennies and



HOUSE WITH GOLDEN WINDOWS

tuppences. And they'd been kept by him for years. In the days of prosperity the household bills at Highfield Court had never been questioned. The cheques had gone out in a ceaseless stream. Nobody had ever dreamed of checking the orders given by the housekeeper. He knew now that the housekeeper was as confirmed a thief as any of the rascally tradesmen. All housekeepers who demanded a free hand or threatened to throw up the job were incorrigible thieves. He had known it for years, but his sense of dignity wouldn't allow him to scrutinize the tradesmen's books. Thieves! Unblushing thieves! And tradesmen were accessories to the fact. Food was ordered and never delivered, but the bill was paid and the housekeeper shared the loot. The same thing happened in the stables and garage and the kitchen. Honourable, tradition-loving England. Bah! They ought to send all domestics to Chicago to learn humility and the meaning of rectitude. Wait till he had weathered this storm. He'd teach them their place. They'd bend the knee before him . . .

"That's just how I used to feel in New York, pater," said Reginald, "but I found the exercise of working up my temper made me hungrier than ever. For the sake of economy I forgot all my prejudices against the people."

By the time the Shadrows were ready to take the road, caravan and trailer provisioned, there wasn't sufficient ready cash among them to tempt a pickpocket to jeopardize his virtue. Subtly, the word had been whispered in the village that it *was* only an original holiday the family contemplated, and if it were extended beyond the period agreed on they might conceivably let Highfield Court with the sole object of keeping it in repair and order while they were away.

The last of the requisites were being carried out to the caravan and trailer. It was a glorious summer morning. In the distance the purple mists were still clinging to the hillsides, reluctant to let go at the bidding

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

of the climbing sun. The freshening breeze was impregnated with mellow odour of farmyard and hedgerow. The trees in the weald shook their full dresses like wanton queans. White-rigged galleons sailed adventurously the sapphire blue of sky, cheered on by a singing wind. The croaking in the rookery beyond the moat of Highfield Court, the hustling and rustling amongst the leaves, the hurrying and scurrying of the older birds to replenish the breakfast-table in the age-old nests—all this was a pæan of praise to the grandeur of the new-born day. The haymakers were stirring sleepily in the sweep of grassland beyond the farm; the figure on the seat of the mowing machine swayed lazily to the rock of the uneven ground; the magical chatter of swiftly-moving cutting blades called back the sweetness of sleep but newly-forsaken. A wood-pigeon wheeled around a clump of elms in the near distance, catching and joying in the glint of sunshine on its grey and pale blue feathers; its mate swooped down from a higher altitude and tantalized with the flash of its white underwing. Upward they soared and circled in chase and quickening desire. Life a-quiver with ecstasy. Far beyond the confines of the village a chalk road wormed its way out of field and foliage and zig-zagged to the ridge of hills, leading the way out into the mysteries on the other side, calling to the laggards and the faint-hearted. A glorious morning with Hope riding thigh to thigh with High Adventure!

The House With the Golden Windows was drawn up to the main doors. The green and yellow panels laughed in the sunlight. The trailer was almost loaded; from every hook along its sides something was suspended. Within, there was everything conceivably useful on the great adventure. Reginald and Sadie had drawn up an inventory and checked it with care as the loading went on. To and from the house, the members of the family moved, each contributing to the task of removal.

HOUSE WITH GOLDEN WINDOWS

Right up to the last few moments there was a fluttering hope in Sir Thomas's heart that a loophole of escape might present itself. It was the resignation of the rest of the family that helped him to believe he was the victim of a hoax. As the women-folk moved out of the room, Sadie and Harold bringing up the rear, he turned to Reginald and said :

"I'd like a word with you alone, my boy."

For the first time since his return Reginald showed resentment ; he even adopted a dictatorial attitude.

"It must be only a word, pater," he said ; "we ought to be moving according to schedule, and I know what's ahead of us."

Sir Thomas tried to smile indulgently.

"You were always a whimsical, eccentric fellow," he said slowly, "and sometimes I've wondered if you were quite——"

Reginald interposed with the insistence that his mind was all right, even if his pocket might be cramped.

"I have doubted," said his father, "that you are capable of taking anything seriously. You are aware of my insolvency : you must have some idea of the mental pain that fact gives me. Tell me, frankly, is this your only notion of how we may get out of our unfortunate predicament ?"

Reginald accepted the challenge.

"First tell me," he said, "if you know of a single person who might lend you the money to liquidate your liabilities ?"

"No"—quite frankly. Then with some hopefulness : "Lady Muriel Fratton called recently. She wondered when you might be returning from the States."

Reggie looked at him quizzingly.

"Do we owe her anything, pater ?" he asked.

"No"—irritably. "But she came into her uncle's fortune a few months ago."

"Tophole ! I didn't think there was a fortune left

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

in England. I thought we had given it all to America or spent it on the Dole."

"Your mother and I wondered if there might be something more than friendship between you two."

"Wondering about some things may keep your mind from others—to your advantage."

Sir Thomas frowned.

"Is it," he asked sneeringly, "your intention to marry this daughter of a pork butcher?"

And this after he had professed to be fascinated by the elf!

Reginald read several meanings into the question. There was the hint that he and Sadie, having flouted convention thus far, were determined to mock the laws of morality—that Reginald, the Shadrow, had been dragged down by Sadie, the pork butcher's daughter, to the accepting of any vulgar liaison.

"Are you thinking of marrying her in the near future?" Sir Thomas asked, taking momentary indignation for embarrassment.

"Certainly not," said Reginald, firmly.

Sir Thomas sighed.

"America used to boast of her high standard of morality," he sneered. "Perhaps her influx of wealth has undermined her principles."

"Leave America to look after her own principles," said Reggie. "I've adopted a good many of them and feel the better for it. You never did speak well of America."

"I do not know sufficient of her to speak well," said Sir Thomas, with delightful arrogance. "I asked you a question, my boy, which is of vital importance."

"Look here, pater, would you be more friendly disposed towards Sadie if we were married?"

"Certainly not."

"I thought so. Why not?"

"Because I don't know her," said Sir Thomas.

"That's an English reason," said Reggie, bracing

HOUSE WITH GOLDEN WINDOWS

his shoulders. "Well, I want you to get to know her. Sadie may not be the daughter of a baronet, but if I were a king I'd know where to look for a queen."

Sir Thomas stared fixedly at the ceiling.

"We Shadrows don't encourage sentiment, Reginald," said he, coldly. "And this is a very practical age. I'm thinking of your future."

"No, pater, you're not; you're thinking of your own dignity."

"And yours."

"I can look after mine," said Reginald. "You've got to be hard up and hungry to understand the worth of dignity." He looked in the direction of the caravan. "What is wrong with the jolly idea?" he asked. "It's better than going to friends and begging for help. They'd be tickled to death to learn that the great Sir Thomas, Justice of the Peace, political pillar, aristocrat and autocrat, was down and out."

"Beggars can't be choosers, I suppose," said Sir Thomas. "It seems hard that a family with such splendid traditions——"

Reginald stopped him with a gesture.

"We're not going to beg, pater. We're going to work and see the world. I want you to see it as I've seen it. This old country is pretty hard hit. Go where you may, the cry is the same: No work and no money. There are thousands of dam' fine fellows tramping the roads looking for work. It's work or die. Get on or get out. Jobs are not growing on trees, and titles don't help you to get a job, either. The people are not ready to sneer at a titled man who has lost his money; they are going to cheer like hell if he puts his back into it and tries to fight his way up again. You know, pater, you're poisonously ignorant of life."

"My boy!"

"Oh, I don't want to take advantage of your poverty in order to rub in a few truths, pater, but all the jolly old stink in France hasn't changed you a bit. You're

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

thinking along the old lines that were good enough for your grandfather."

It was quite a speech but he couldn't finish it until he dragged from his pocket the "script" so carefully prepared by him and Sadie during the voyage across the Atlantic.

"Traditions!" he bellowed like a Hyde Park orator—bellowed shamelessly with the written speech in his hand. "You live on the old and fallacious tradition that when God made an Englishman he paused in His labours. You're—you're—" His voice trailed away. He looked more closely at the written words.

"Go on," Sir Thomas commanded.

A silly smile dwelt on Reginald's face as he turned the notes over and over.

"Dam' it, pater," he said, "I've pinched Sadie's speech. Well, there you are. You know what I mean?"

Sir Thomas smiled.

"Well, well," he said, "I suppose we have fallen in the estimation of the world. We may as well fall to the bottom. We have only our personal belongings left to us. Let it be the caravan for the summer; we may not be interested in the following winter."

"I haven't fallen," said Reggie.

Sir Thomas permitted himself another smile.

"I should say," he said, contemptuously, "that while in America you spent a good deal of your spare time in the cinema. I have read of their devastating influence."

Of course the lad should have beat his chest with his fist and groped for another written speech. Not likely. He smiled and confessed that he and Sadie often went into a Broadway cinema . . . just to hold hands.

"Good God," cried Sir Thomas. "Which ancestor of mine was half-witted?"

"That's what Sadie's father asked when he looked at me," said Reginald.

The unhappy interview was interrupted by the sudden appearance of two uncouth men who inquired

HOUSE WITH GOLDEN WINDOWS

the whereabouts of Mr. Simeon Grossett, their employer. They had brought a motor van, as directed, they said. With great dignity of voice Sir Thomas ordered them into the hall, closed the door and returned to his son who was unwrapping the paper from a stick of chewing-gum. Shadrow adopted a new attitude.

"Very well," said he, pompously. "But rest assured of this, young man: I shall not stand idly by and see that young, unsophisticated girl imposed on, even though her father is a pork butcher."

Reginald was "breaking in" the stick of chewing-gum so he couldn't reply. Sadie did it for him. Her voice came from the direction of the hall, where she was having an encounter with Grossett's men.

"You get to hell outta here," said the "young unsophisticated girl", "or I'll hoist you a kick in the pants."

Then the door was pushed open and Sadie, her arms laden with cardboard-boxes belonging to the others, pushed into the room on her way to the caravan. Her face was glowing; her eyes twinkled as she looked at Sir Thomas and realized that he must have heard the explosion.

"Sorry I stepped on the gas that time," she said apologetically, "but there's a big bum out there who's kinda fresh, and I don't stand for that."

Sir Thomas stared out of the window where he could see his own conception of dignity falling like the dust of a seismic disturbance. Reginald did a manly thing: he linked an arm in his father's and said cheerily:

"Come along, pater. Let's get all the fun we can out of our troubles."

Sir Thomas's lips were twitching foolishly as he followed his son out of the room to where the rest of the family were collecting the goods and chattels that remained to them.

Sadie went to the caravan, and when she returned from the veranda it was to find Phoebe waiting for her

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

in the library ; she put her packages on the table, and there was something in the expression of her eyes that paid a tribute to the bigness of the maligned flapper of the day.

"Sadie," she said softly, "I haven't said much, but I'm thinking a lot."

And Sadie suddenly dropped the mask of the irresponsible and said with equal softness :

"I know you are."

They were standing very close together. Phoebe's bosom was rising and falling with suspicious haste.

"All this," she began and nodded at the clutter on the table and floor—"all this may suggest a joke, but it isn't. Do you realize what it means to my father—to my people?"

Sadie's big eyes blinked like a cat's in the sun.

"Reggie and I have been in conference," she said significantly.

Phoebe nodded.

"You're awfully fond of Reggie—aren't you?" she said.

"I'll tell the world."

Phoebe flinched from the stare although it was full of encouragement and sympathy.

"They don't take me seriously in this house," she said, "because I'm just a flapper, but I know the pater has been through a rotten time—I've tried to cheer them in my own way, but it was the wrong way, I suppose. Flappers are considered to be wooden dolls. Say, do you love the old crust very much?"

"Meaning Reggie?"

"The old bean."

"I'd give him up to another woman, if she was the right woman," said Sadie, "and that's a mighty sight harder thing to do than to die for him. Have you ever been in love, Phoebe?"

Of course, Phoebe should have screamed at the originality of the question, but she didn't : she said :

HOUSE WITH GOLDEN WINDOWS

"Not so's you'd notice it. I was going to be engaged to Sir Peter Carter's son, but this washes it out."

Sadie's eyes blinked more vigorously.

"Wasn't it clean?" she asked, without wishing to be facetious.

Phoebe smiled at her—smiled rather pathetically.

"I mean it's queered the whole thing," she said. "Finished it. He called the other day and we just wiped it out."

"You were in love with him," Sadie said. "Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

The younger girl seemed strangely old in that minute.

"I was going to marry him because I was getting bored with life here—at Highfield Court. We don't talk about love in these days—not since the War."

Sadie leaned forward and kissed her.

"Then you were not in love with him," she said emphatically. "And if you'd married him without being in love—why, you'd have been no better than a cheat."

Phoebe nodded as though she were quite disposed to agree with the sentiment without being much stirred by it.

"So old-fashioned," she sighed, "to talk about love."

"Love," said Sadie, "is never going to be too old-fashioned for me. Why, I've been in love ever since I was knee-high to a grasshopper—in love with a dream . . . till I met Reggie: then I knew he was the dream."

The conversation was interrupted by the voice of Reginald. He was urging the others to quicken their paces: he wasn't going to allow reflection to kill the impulse to fall in with his scheme. The door was flung open and he blustered in, packages under his arms, his hair awry, his face flushed with victory.

"Jump to it, girls," he shouted: "we've got 'em going. They think it's a joke now and they're entering into it."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Phoebe turned suddenly and kissed Sadie on the cheek ; then she rushed out of the room, Sadie following her, an expression of amazement on her face. Reginald was too concerned with his collection of packages to take much notice.

Hogan came in and planked a parrot and cage on the table.

"Ye'll take it with you, sir," said he, inquiringly. "Like as not we'll be glad of the company," and out he went.

Reginald poked a finger through the bars and addressed the bird.

"Now, look here, Mr. Hiram B. Jolson," said he to the parrot, "you stand for America. I know you think I'm a sap, but I'm going to make you eat all you've said about us English. I'm fed up with parrot talk about what we are and what we're not. You'll probably fall in with a crowd of natural enemies before we get to the end of this crazy journey, and I fancy that you'll be glad that I really like you."

And he was still talking at the wretched bird when a stranger set foot on the veranda. The french-windows being open he looked down into the room. He was a tall, well-proportioned man but dressed with execrable taste : his shoulders stood out square as though they were packed with wadding ; his middle was clasped by a narrow leather belt with a silver buckle.

Reggie looked up from the parrot, stared for a second at the stranger, gasped : "Well, I'm damned," and dashing to the doorway through which Sadie had gone a moment before shouted : "Sadie ! Sadie ! Look who's here !"

A few seconds and she was by his side, clinging to him as though she feared he had been wounded unto death.

"Sadie ! Your father !"

The man on the veranda came down into the room. Sadie left Reginald's side, flung her arms around her

HOUSE WITH GOLDEN WINDOWS

parent's neck, and exclaimed: "Now, what do you know about that?"

Reginald looked on helplessly.

Mr. Jolson, having put his daughter aside, gazed sternly at Reginald.

"So," he began, "this is your father's place?"

Reginald took no notice of the remark; his brain was trying to grapple with the new problem that had presented itself.

"Sadie," he said, in a tired voice, "he's a big 'blow': he'll spoil everything if he talks."

He moved towards the door as though he would lock it against other members of the family, but there came a procession. Hogan, laden with luggage, was leading the way to the caravan. Lady Shadrow, laughing joyously at the promise of a new adventure, followed close behind him: Aunt Agatha, very talkative without having any particular audience, was waddling indelicately in the rear. They appeared not to see Mr. Jolson, but that was not surprising since Aunt Agatha, at least, couldn't see clearly over the mountain of hat-boxes she was carrying. They passed through the room, across the veranda, and so to the caravan.

Mr. Jolson, looking more prosperous than a book-maker at the theatre, stared after the trio.

"What's the big idea?" he asked.

"That you've got to quit," snapped Reggie.

"But I've crossed the Atlantic to find you," Mr. Jolson protested.

Reginald was unable to contain himself.

"I'll tell him, Sadie," said he, with a burst of courage, and went straight up to his man.

"Attababy," whispered Sadie rather fearfully.

"The last time we discussed matters," said Reggie—"shall I say international matters?—you said you'd rather see your daughter in a Broadway revue than married to me."

Mr. Jolson was startled by the show of fire.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Well," said he, "I took that back to an extent."

"You took *that* back, father," said Sadie, "but you left a lot."

Mr. Jolson was stung by the defection of his daughter. These two were determined to defy him: they were not showing the fear and trembling that he had expected.

"See here, Sadie," he blustered, "you know what I think about these English?"

Reggie jumped into the breach, every one of his guns trained on the enemy.

"That's because you don't know us, sir," he said. He made a frantic pass at the air as though he were annoyed with himself because his memory was failing him at the critical moment.

Sadie ranged herself by his side and brought out another of those written speeches in the writing of which they had collaborated. She prompted her man:

"'You said that my people were a crowd of snobs'."

"That's it," said Reggie brightly. "A crowd of snobs and hadn't the sense to come in out of the rain."

From the direction of the caravan came the voice of Aunt Agatha:

"Hogan!"

"M'lady?"

"Have you any brains at all?"

"No, m'lady."

"Ah! I thought you were going to answer me back. Don't forget the waterproof sheets. I've been on these camping expeditions before. Only a fool expects the sun to shine every day."

Mr. Hiram Jolson squirmed a little. Perhaps (who knows?) the sight of the caravan reminded him of his own youth, when paradise was represented by bare feet and a swimming hole. He looked at Reginald, and said, half-apologetically:

"The remark I made was that your people would sneer at my daughter because she didn't belong to their class."

Acc-No-283
62

HOUSE WITH GOLDEN WINDOWS

Reggie took a mean advantage of Mr. Jolson's momentary vacillation. He went on with his speech:

"You were damned rude, sir."

"Distressingly rude," Sadie corrected from the 'script.

"Distressingly rude," said Reginald, hooking his thumbs under his armpits. "And an Englishman, I would have you know, arrogates to himself the right to be rude to anyone he dam' well pleases. Isn't that so, Sadie?"

"Okay with me, chief," said Sadie. "Poppa, you'd better call our hand or throw yours in. We're holding 'fours' against your pair of jacks. Go back to your hotel."

Mr. Jolson called the bluff in another way. He hadn't been to a ball game between Harvard and Columbia for nothing. He threw back his head, looked at Reginald as a sensitive nose might look at a skunk, and without the slightest trace of Americanese, said:

"When I made the observation, I was thinking of the undeniable disparity between your set and mine. I had assimilated the logic of——"

Reginald downed his cards. His eyes opened wide. The inflection of Mr. Jolson's voice—its cultured smoothness, its hint of erudition, its perfect understanding of orthoepy—took the lad's breath from his throat.

"Hell," he managed to say, and followed up with a gentlemanly: "I beg your pardon, *sir*."

Mr. Jolson widened his collar by the simple expedient of tugging at it with thumb and forefinger.

"I wished to insinuate as delicately as possible," said he, "that your people didn't know the meaning—they had never really appreciated the grandeur, the dignity of labour."

Reginald smiled inanely.

"Who in hell wrote *your* speech for you?" he asked.

Mr. Jolson ignored the question. He was conscious of that thrill which comes from the knowledge of having

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

impressed. He cleared his throat, cast his gaze on the Statue of Liberty, saw the lights of Broadway flickering, and said :

"Now, I started life——"

"Ah!" breathed Reginald. He was now on safer ground. "I know how every rich American started life, and I loathe the smell of a shoe-shine parlour in consequence. And I hate the sight of the nickel that grew into a million dollars. If you value your neck, sir, don't talk to Sir Thomas Shadrow of the dollars you own and the millions you hope to make if the public taste for pork holds good. He'll ask you some nasty questions about the three years you took to consider the advisability of coming into the jolly old War. He'll have some absolutely poisonous things to say about the interest we have to pay you every year on the money you loaned us so that we might go on risking our perfectly good necks to keep you out of the scrap. He'll tell you what he thought about your joining the Society of Friends who hadn't any use for fighting; he'll sing you the chorus of your priceless war song: 'I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier'. He'll——"

Sadie butted in :

"Steady, cave-man! Never put a creditor's back up by telling him he ought to be grateful for the borrowing. Be first at a feast and last at a fight."

"I know, Sadie," said Reggie, petulantly, "but I'm getting warmed up."

Mr. Jolson, to his eternal discredit, wasn't moved in the slightest by the implied reflection on his country's refusal to rush where angels had feared to tread.

"What I want to know," he said, taking another look at the spray-washed Statue of Liberty and Staten Island and the expert spitters leaning over the sea wall at the Battery—"what I want to know is this: Could Sir Thomas Shadrow, Justice of the Peace, start right at the bottom of the hill as I did?"

HOUSE WITH GOLDEN WINDOWS

It was a challenge, but the two irresponsibles who had eloped from Philadelphia were as comprehensive as a dictionary: they hadn't overlooked any possible argument. Sadie, true to her country, but truer to the workings of her heart, glanced at Reginald, her man, as to say: "We didn't overlook that remark." She nodded encouragingly.

"Now, baby—shoot!" she said.

And Reginald "shot".

"Sir," he said, "any sap can start to climb the hill of prosperity. It takes a man with a giant's courage to do it a *second* time!"

It came as a beautifully-timed right counter to the ribs and Mr. Jolson clinched in order to regain his wind. Before he could phrase another sentence, Sir Thomas Shadrow, burdened with packages, staggered through the room on his way to the caravan. He, like the others, took no notice of the occupants of the room. Etiquette was on its vacation that day; the main thing was to get away from Highfield Court as soon as possible. Mr. Simeon Grossett, the mortgagee, resembled a bomb that might explode at any moment.

Mr. Jolson stared after the little figure of the knight.

"I can't figure it all out," he said.

Reginald followed his gaze. Phoebe had joined the little group in the drive and her small shingled head was dancing like a cork on the tide; she, too, was joying in the promise of To-morrow.

"You can't figure it out," Reginald echoed. "Quite simple, my dear sir."

Mr. Jolson coughed.

"I'd like to meet Sir Thomas Shadrow," he said.

"That's why I came across the Pond."

At that moment, Sir Thomas was helping Hogan to lift a trunk to the caravan. Hogan's hand slipped. So did the trunk. Sir Thomas growled: "Can't you hold the dam' thing?"

Reginald answered Mr. Jolson.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Sir Thomas is not receiving visitors to-day." He paused with all the artifice of a vaudeville comedian waiting for the laugh. Then: "He's starting on that second climb of the hill."

Mr. Jolson shifted uneasily on his feet.

"Do you mean that he's broke?" he asked.

"To the wide, wide world," said Reginald airily, and there was a rather beautiful silence to follow.

Sadie interposed: "Come, Reggie! We ought to be helping. Poppa, go straight back to your hotel and don't breathe a word. And don't go talking about your business in the hotel. Pork isn't everybody's meat. And these English hotels forget the whole of the Ten Commandments when an American signs the register. They sting him good and hard."

Mr. Jolson was breathing with difficulty. He couldn't bring himself to believe that his ears had heard aright. He grasped at Reginald's shoulder while keeping his gaze fixed on Sir Thomas in the drive.

"Do you mean to say that you'd allow him—that old man—to do this thing?" he said.

Reginald shook off the hand, and quoted:

"'The grandeur, the dignity of labour,'" adding: "Did you cherish the fallacy that only Hiram B. Jolson could appreciate it? I said that my father could do it, and he will."

"You'd let him go back to work? Is that the spirit of the English son?"

Reggie tapped his chest as though to satisfy himself that it was still there.

"Sir," he said, "the English spirit makes of adversity a hell of an interesting adventure. Take that and gum it on the back of the Prohibition Act."

Then he and Sadie marched to the veranda and so to the caravan.

"But an English gentleman!" gasped Mr. Jolson. "An old English gentleman like Sir Thomas Shadrow!"

It was at this moment that Harold—always behind—

HOUSE WITH GOLDEN WINDOWS

ambled through the library with the last of his packages. Mr. Jolson caught him by the arm and swung him half-around. It is to pay a tribute to the spirit of the true American to say that Mr. Jolson hurled aside his prejudices in that moment.

"Look here, sir," said he, almost frantically, "my way is the hundred per cent. American way : help with cash and to hell with advice. If you're one of the family, tell the old dad I'll let him have all he needs."

And Harold, true to his breeding, shook off the restraining hand, saying :

"Don't be so damned familiar ! I don't know you. We haven't been introduced ! Have we ?"

He passed to the caravan, where Sadie was now taking photographic snapshots of the party ; a few moments and Mr. Jolson was left standing on the balcony, staring at a small cloud of dust along the road.

The adventurers were on their way ! The mortgagee or the house agents could look after Highfield Court and all that it contained.

From another room came Mr. Simeon Grossett, the mortgagee. He had overheard a good deal of the conversation.

"That your daughter ?" he inquired.

Mr. Jolson nodded without knowing why.

"Going to marry into that family o' lunatics !"

Again Mr. Jolson nodded.

"Don't let 'er," said Mr. Grossett grimly. "Hit 'er on th' 'ead with a 'ammer."

CHAPTER V

PRIDE SITS IN THE BACK SEAT

THE Shadrow caravan moved slowly along the high-road, and, to the astonishment of Sir Thomas, nobody appeared to give them more than a casual glance as they passed. He was relieved and yet hurt by the fact. Even though the logical desire was to escape undue notice, his pride smarted in the knowledge that a baronet might walk in a crowd and be no more than one in it.

Reginald and Sadie sat up in front and drove the two horses. Inside, Lady Shadrow sat on the wicker chair and strove to appear at ease as the caravan rocked and dipped over the broken places in the road. Phoebe commandeered the best sleeping bunk until her mother should need it and pretended to read a novel. Aunt Agatha sat on the camp stool and nursed Wung, the Pekingese. Sir Thomas was content to sit on the floor "taking cover", as Phoebe said. Hogan and Harold sat on the end of the wagon trailer, their legs dangling over the tail-board. They didn't speak to each other save as master to servant. Harold couldn't have said why he consented to sit there, and Hogan didn't know why he shouldn't. Their specific job was to warn the driver of the caravan of the desire of any motorist to overtake and pass them. Reginald had rigged up a communicating bell, but when the road was particularly smooth the human voice carried more effectually.

Harold was in nowise moody or taciturn, merely abstracted. He was a true Shadrow: the world was divided into hemispheres—he lived in one and the rest of the people in the other. Harold had served as an officer in Flanders; he was an excellent officer, but

PRIDE SITS IN THE BACK SEAT

without being given time in which to reflect he couldn't have remembered the name of any private who served under him. He would have been frightfully bored by the suggestion that there was any need for him to remember.

Hogan was enjoying the adventure thus early. The atmosphere of equality made strong appeal to him.

"Well, what do you think of the outfit, Mr. Harold?"

"I beg your pardon!"

"I've known worse—haven't you?"

"Worse—what?"

"Outfits, Mr. Harold."

"Did I mention outfits to you, Hogan?"

"No."

"Oh!"

An uncommonly lively gramophone would have stopped dead at that "Oh!" James the First wasn't too highly-paid for those baronet patent rights in 1611 when one comes to calculate the value of the inflection of voice that went with them. An everyday plebeian might go to a thousand guineas to put in a refrigerating plant for his cold storage; an out-and-out, unsoiled baronet of a vintage not later than the nineteenth century might freeze the Gulf Stream with a hiccup if he felt so disposed. It is an intriguing, inimitable affair, as lifeless as a mouldering corpse yet as full of significance as a hangman's tap on the shoulder. Take the word "Really"! It comes like a slow-moving wind down a glacier, yet it has the curious effect of heating up every nerve of the listener to whom it is addressed. It begins by gagging him, then it so incinerates his own vocabulary that he hasn't a word to say in reply. It covers every ramification, tributary, and off-shoot of Finality. Hogan, for instance, could think of a whole dictionary of words, mostly incarnadined, that he might have used, but the absolute futility of saying anything was impressed on his very soul, and he contented himself with making grimaces at an inquisitive road-mender.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

The House With the Golden Windows lumbered along the high road towards Horsham.

Sir Thomas had many acquaintances in the old Sussex town: he was satisfied that none of them would hazard a guess at the identity of the occupants of the caravan. Why, he became so human during the next half-hour that a latent sense of humour asserted itself. He wondered what some of the minor magistrates would say if, seeing them in the street, he leaned out of the window, and told them the truth.

Aunt Agatha, who had been sniffing disgustedly because of some real or fancied odour in the caravan, was given telepathetic power in that moment. She looked across at her recumbent brother and actually smiled in sympathy.

"They wouldn't believe it, Thomas," she said. "There's no subterfuge like the truth. Whenever dear 'Gogo' (the defunct Lord Briskett) wished to deceive me about his philandering, he always told the truth knowing that I wouldn't believe it, thinking it his imbecile idea of humour."

Sir Thomas said: "Really!" (Harold held no monopoly in the exclamation.) He preferred to ruminate in silence. He was trying to persuade himself that when this nightmare was passed he would find it easy to persuade his acquaintances that it was no more than an adventure—the giving up of Highfield Court so that he might study rural England from the windows of a caravan. It needed only a little reflection to get the right perspective; it was a patriotic thing to do. From day to day the newspapers were exhorting the wealthy to patronize their own people, see and appreciate the glories of their own country. Happy reflection this: it helped to mollify the turbulent emotions that had been embittering him for some considerable time. Make light of his misfortunes—that was the idea! The most cynical of his enemies would find something to admire in that.

PRIDE SITS IN THE BACK SEAT

He looked at the delicate Lady Shadrow and interpreted the smile on her face. She was saying: "It's just an adventure; we shall all be the better for it." She caught his eye, and said:

"Of course, it's a joke. Learn to laugh at the predicament and you'll find the whole world laughing with you."

He felt a sickening shame at his failure to provide against such a contingency as this. Always he had tried to lead a blameless life in consonance with the dignity of his social position; it was hard to have to realize that poverty expunged all virtues in the opinion of the English people. They were prone to boast of their spirit of fair play, but they were contradictory to the point of imbecility in their view-points.

Phoebe had dropped her novel to glance through the morning newspaper she had brought away with her. She called out:

"I say! How much do you think old Hattrack's in the soup for?"

"Phoebe!—admonishingly from Aunt Agatha who abhorred slang.

"Half a million," said Phoebe. "He ought to have attended for his first examination in bankruptcy, yesterday, but he sent a letter instead."

Sir Thomas held his breath. Unknown to the other members of the family he was one of the infamous Hattrack's victims. Only a few thousands, it was true, but they would have represented sanctuary in this hour.

"By Jove, we ought to profit from the fellow's courage," said Phoebe. "He wrote to the Official Receiver that he couldn't possibly attend as he had arranged to go to Lingfield Park races where he might pick up a little for the creditors! That's nerve! I *do* admire a fellow who can get away with that sort of thing."

"Really!" said Sir Thomas again, and silence fell; only the musical rumbling of the caravan broke into it. He

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

looked again at the delicate Lady Shadrow ; her blue-lined hands were holding fast to the arm-rests of the wicker chair : she was slightly nervous, but the smile of hopefulness never left her face. He sighed. Perhaps Phoebe, the modern, did view life through clearer eyes than his. The world did seem to have more compassion for the audacious adventurer and rogue than for the man who applied the whole of his faculties to the observing of that which was moral and in accord with the highest principles of civilization.

The communicating door between the driver and the inside of the caravan was opened and Reginald looked in.

"Passing through Horsham," he called cheerily and simulating the voice of a bus conductor. "You ought to know Horsham, pater. Sat on the Bench here—didn't you ? Worst town in the country to drive through. Watch the pedestrians ! They walk right in front of anything on wheels. They think it's clever ! Say—— !"

"Look out, Mutt !"—from Sadie. "Keep to the road, big boy. You were nearly on the pavement that time !"

"All right ! All right ! Say, pater, why have Sussex people such long thin legs ?"

Aunt Agatha answered from the floor of the caravan. One wheel had struck the kerbstone and the jar had shot her from her stool. Wung, the Peke, must have thought it a new game, for he gripped her by the hair.

"Look where you're going," she shouted angrily, "or I shall demand to be put out."

The communicating door slammed, to be opened a few seconds later.

"The real answer, pater, is that Sussex roads are so rotten that the natives stretch their ankles in pulling their feet out of the mud. How about a little community singing as we go through the jolly old town ?"

"Reginald !"

Even Phoebe joined in the chorus of protest.

"And yet I like him in that humour," thought Sir

PRIDE SITS IN THE BACK SEAT

Thomas. "It helps to confirm my belief that this is all part of a practical joke."

The caravan was halted in the Carfax, more or less a square around which the converging traffic moved as though it were taking part in a circus performance.

"Why has the fool stopped here?" groaned Sir Thomas. "Everybody in the town knows me."

Reginald opened his door a few inches and whispered loudly :

"Take cover and leave it to Harold ! Only an officious 'cop'."

The police officer who had held up his hand in peremptory manner approached the caravan.

"Gippos ?" the officer queried sinisterly.

Reginald nudged Sadie, and jerked a thumb in the direction of the trailer. The policeman went around to where the melancholy Harold was dangling his long legs. The tweed cap he wore had been pulled down over his forehead so that one eye was almost concealed, the mud from the roads they had traversed had spread itself over his trousers.

"You the boss of this menagerie ?" the policeman asked. "The baboon up in front don't seem to 'savvy' anything. What have you got to say ? Gippo, ain't you ? Where you come from ? And where do you think you're going ? Spit it out, lousy, and don't scratch. A wash wouldn't do you no harm. My oath !"

Harold, who had been solemnly pondering the possibility of England ceding Malta to Mussolini in the event of a rupture with the French, aroused himself with a start, and said icily :

"I beg your pardon, my good man."

The officer was young but he had considerable experience of fair grounds and nomads.

"None of your blinkin' lip," said he. "Where's your camp ?"

Harold looked inquiringly at Hogan, and Hogan looked again at the police officer.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"We're passing through the town," he said.

"And I asked you a question—didn't I?"

"You're from London, I gather," Harold observed. "Sent here as a punishment, maybe? Impudence, perhaps?"

"You're gippos, romanys? Eh?"

"Tell me, my loquacious friend, under what statute of the realm are you authorized to stop peaceful citizens and demand to be told where they are going? Gippos, Romanys, Boy Scouts, or furniture removers—whatever we may be—are not amenable to the self-created laws of every public servant in uniform."

"I can see you ain't gippos." The officer had modified his attitude. "Touring actors, maybe. You see, it's like this: we got orders from the County magistrates to hustle gipsies and van-dwellers along no matter whether they're honest or not."

"Really!"

The officer shivered, raised a forearm, and brushed the frost from his chin.

"Yes, *sir*," he said, and shivered again.

"I'm afraid," said Harold in one of those slow-motion voices, "I am not interested in the idiosyncrasies of your County magistrates. It may surprise you to learn that an occupant of the caravan immediately in front—" the listeners within held their breath—"is no less a person than Sir Thomas Shadrow, Baronet!"

"Ha! Ha!" The officer laughed loudly. "You're actors all right," he said. "Go ahead. Follow the white line! My regards to old Tom when you see him." He added as a tribute to his own sense of independence: "Damned old fool!"

Reginald drove on. Hogan stared up at the blue sky. Harold returned to his consideration of European politics. Aunt Agatha said to nobody in particular:

"'Gogo' was right. 'Always tell the truth,' he said, 'if you want to get away with a lie.'"

"Why should they hustle gipsies out of a town?"

PRIDE SITS IN THE BACK SEAT

Phoebe asked. "I've driven through this town when I'd have liked to hustle a herd of buffaloes through the pedestrians. The beasts stand about at the street corners, waiting for an accident so that they can earn a shilling by giving evidence at the inquest."

"We are neither motorists nor pedestrians at the moment," said Sir Thomas. "View-points change according to one's position."

Phoebe tapped on the driver's door.

"When and where do we lunch, Speedy Boy?" she asked.

"Where the law allows us to stop," said Reginald.

"Isn't this a free country?"

"Not if you travel by caravan, Phoebe."

Phoebe craned her neck to get a glimpse of Sadie.

"Are you two enjoying yourselves out there?"

"Sitting right on top of the world," said Sadie.

"Holding hands?"

"Not in a caravan," said Reginald, knowingly. "You ask the pater, Phoebe. He knows the law."

"How perfectly absurd," said Phoebe. "Why, the things I've seen done in a limousine on the Brighton road!"

"But not in a caravan, sweetie." The door closed with a sigh of regret.

Phoebe asked of the roof:

"Are the English more moral than any other race?"

"Of course, of course," said Aunt Agatha.

"Holy smoke! What a cesspool of depravity France must be!"

Sir Thomas made no comment, he was staring moodily at the Pekingese.

The caravan passed slowly through the town and turned north-east towards Crawley. Clinkety-clank! Clinkety-clank! Phoebe had resumed her reading of the newspaper. Lady Shadrow glanced at Sir Thomas and sought to divert his thoughts.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"I don't remember having passed along this road before," she said.

"Nor I," said he.

"You must have motored along here a thousand times," said Phoebe.

"Why mention motoring?" said Aunt Agatha, as one who would say: "Those times are past and gone."

Phoebe sighed. "Dare we go through Crawley?" she asked of nobody. "There's bound to be some wretched person to recognize us and spread the glad tidings. I think I hate the place. Everybody in that town knows a bit of scandal about somebody else."

Sir Thomas said, reminiscently: "I believe the history of the place is intensely interesting, although Ifield, to the west, is the more significant to the historian. I must ask Harold about it."

Harold climbed into the moving caravan.

"Hello, my boy," said Sir Thomas. "Was it too uncomfortable in the other vehicle?"

Harold was peevish. He wiped his spectacles and sat on the floor.

"No, but Hogan is so noisy to-day, that I can't concentrate," he said. "I'm beginning to hate that man, pater. He seems to have been waiting for all this to happen so that he might insist on his individuality."

"I have always found him most courteous, Harold." Sir Thomas was seriously perturbed. "Really, I could stake my life on his loyalty. What has he been saying?"

"It isn't what he says, pater; it's his breathing that is so offensive."

"An old war wound, Harold, as I've said so often. Don't forget that."

Aunt Agatha sympathized with Harold, for she was only too familiar with that defect of Hogan's: not till now had good breeding allowed her to make reference to it.

"Couldn't the military authorities of those days have provided him with a new nose, Thomas?" she asked

PRIDE SITS IN THE BACK SEAT

in a bitter-sweet voice. "The doctors did some wonderful things during the disturbance, so I've read?"

"Fancy that from you!" said Sir Thomas reproachfully.

"I've borne with it so long and uncomplainingly," said Aunt Agatha. "I wonder why?"

There is a tendency to talk rather glibly about the privileges of rank, but on calm reflection one may conjure up a host of ordeals in this life that rank must tolerate in order to impress the proletariat with its dignity. One of the greatest privileges of the poor lies in the freedom from restraint in the matter of taste. No shackles that encumber the feet of the indigent are so irksome as that damnable warning: "It isn't done!" Many a silk hat and frock coat, sweltering under a summer sun, has damned the coronet at home while gazing on the beatific coolness of a battered straw hat and an open shirt. When we have attained to the highest degree of refined cruelty in the administration of the criminal law we may witness the heart-rending spectacle of a City dustman condemned to pursue his calling in the garb of a West End aristocrat. If tradition is essential to the Empire, why, in the name of justice, should the dustman dodge his share of it?

Harold appeared to derive no lively satisfaction from his aunt's championship. He sat down on the floor of the caravan and pulled some Blue Book statistics from his coat pocket.

Aunt Agatha inhaled rather noisily.

"Have you been sitting *very* close to Hogan?" she inquired. Then, to Sir Thomas: "Do you think we might have another window opened?"

The dividing door was jerked aside. Reginald frowned when he saw Harold sitting inside.

"I say, old man, you must get back to the jolly old observation post: we shall be going through Crawley shortly and there's certain to be somebody who used to know us."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Exactly," said Harold dryly. "That's why I'm in here."

"Better skip back," said Reginald. "Hogan's singing one of the old Army songs."

"Oh, horror," cried Aunt Agatha.

"No," said Reginald, testily. "It's about the 'One-Eyed Reilly'. And there's a pack of kids following behind."

"Heaven help us," moaned Aunt Agatha.

"I think I know that one about 'One-Eyed Reilly'," said Phoebe, reminiscently.

"So does Crawley, no doubt," said Aunt Agatha, acidly.

"But, auntie dear, we must be reasonable. The louder Hogan sings the less chance you have of hearing him breathe through his nose."

"Nonsense, Phoebe! If Hogan believes that he was intended for the operatic stage let him leave our service instantly and see if he can earn his living."

Again the sliding door shot back. Reginald had halted the horses.

"By Jove," he shouted, "old Hogan's fetchin' 'em. The crowd's flinging pennies to him. Jump down, Harold, or he'll bag the lot."

"Drive on," cried Aunt Agatha.

"Too late," said Phoebe, who was gazing out of the window. "Here come the police."

Sir Thomas reached for Lady Shadrow's hand and clutched it tightly. They heard the official voice:

"Where from and where to? Been inspected lately? Any fever or that sort of thing?"

Reginald tried a subterfuge of his own. They heard him say in a loud whisper:

"We're taking a freak to Barnet Fair."

Harold put his head out of the window.

"On whose authority are you delaying us?" he inquired, loftily.

The startled officer gave him a quick glance and called to Reginald.

PRIDE SITS IN THE BACK SEAT

"All right. Get him out of the town as quickly as you can."

The House With the Golden Windows rumbled along. Harold resumed his reading of the statistics he had gathered together before leaving home. He shook his head in perplexity from time to time.

"I say, pater, ponder this : the French raised a war loan in this country of thirty-four million pounds, the British investor being credited with twenty-six francs for each pound invested. In course of time, the French stabilized the franc at a hundred and twenty-five to the pound, so that in paying back that loan they deprive the investors, roundly, of twenty-four million pounds. In view of all that, would you credit the French with business acumen, or sheer cupidity?"

"I don't know," said Sir Thomas, moodily, "and I'm damned if I care. Forgive me, Virginia."

"You're forgiven, Thomas, dear," murmured Lady Shadrow.

"Does the jolting inconvenience you, darling?"

"It lulls me into a beautiful doze, my dear."

They reached the village of Ifield and halted by the side of the road that runs through the woods. Lunch! The first meal of their nomadic life; Reginald, Sadie, and Hogan prepared it. They ranged themselves in a circle, around an imaginary fire. Sadie waited on the delicate Lady Shadrow, laughing and jesting as she went about her work. Sir Thomas sat on an upturned box and gazed reproachfully at the cloud-flecked sky. Aunt Agatha watched the others eat; she had no stomach for the feast. Once, she sighed aloud: "I'll never be able to bring myself to it."

"I've known lots of 'em start like that," said Sadie, "and finish by eating raw turnips."

To right and left of them the woods stretched themselves. Scotch firs and pines, filling the atmosphere with invigorating fragrance. Away to the east, Crawley Downs shimmered like green and purple satin in the

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

heat haze; northward, the London road wound its white way up Reigate Hill.

From out of the undergrowth in the wood strutted a cock pheasant.

"Beautiful," murmured Lady Shadrow. "It's the first time I've appreciated the glory of a pheasant's plumage."

"The gamest bird in the world," said Harold.

"The sweetest," said Reginald, "if the cook knows his job."

Hogan said nothing, but carefully he picked two or three raisins out of the bun he was eating; then he passed to one of the horses and obtained a hair from the tail. Through each raisin he threaded a piece of horse hair so that an eighth of an inch protruded from each side. He disappeared into the wood for a few minutes and nobody missed him.

Aunt Agatha became drowsy; Sadie made her an aromatic pillow of hay, obtained from a nearby rick. She discarded all semblance of dignity and stretched her rather corpulent figure on the greensward.

"Tell me, Thomas," she droned, "do the poor people have all this comfort? If they do, what have they to complain about?"

Sir Thomas snored.

Harold began: "Pater, we must give Mussolini credit for being able to keep his hat on." He looked across at the sleeper, threw a tuft of grass at Wung, the Peke, and returned to his reading.

Phoebe lay on her back, her hands clasped behind her head, her knees gazing inelegantly at the blue of the skies.

A stout, well-fed man came down the road on a motor-cycle.

"No camping here," he said. "We don't allow gipsies in these parts. Sir John won't stand for that. I'm his bailiff."

Aunt Agatha sat upright. Sir Thomas opened one eye. Phoebe lowered her knees.

PRIDE SITS IN THE BACK SEAT

"Where's Reggie?" said Harold, in a bored tone of voice.

"Come on," said the bailiff. "I don't like the look of you."

Harold gave him a critical stare.

"I hate the dam' sight of you," he said to the bailiff, "but I try to conceal my feelings. Does Sir John own this land?"

"The whole estate."

"Possibly the sky above it?"

"I can't say."

"The woods, maybe?"

"Certainly the woods," said the bailiff.

"Poor God," said Phoebe.

"Sir John planted them—quarter of a million of them. Some people plant thistles. How about moving?"

"Planted all those glorious firs and pines," Lady Shadrow echoed. "How can he be surprised that people wish to linger here. Convey my compliments to your master and tell him that Lady Shadrow thinks——"

"Virginia"—from Sir Thomas.

"I dare say he had a reason for planting them," Aunt Agatha suggested. "What does he hope to reap?"

"Anything but gratitude," said the bailiff. He went back to his motor-cycle and rode away.

Aunt Agatha looked after the disappearing rider.

"I'm certain there's a reason," she said, suspiciously. "Now, why should he take the trouble to plant firs and pines?"

"Perhaps he didn't like the smell of the place," said Phoebe. "Perhaps he is interested in afforestation. Perhaps he encourages charcoal burning. Why can't you give people credit for good intentions?"

Aunt Agatha didn't take umbrage; she was too preoccupied with her suspicions.

"Not charcoal burning," she said, shaking her head sapiently. "That industry has practically died out."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

She looked at Sir Thomas. "Do you remember how you and I came on the charcoal burners in Deepdene Woods? I was frightened as never before. It was evening—wasn't it? I can still see the faint glow from the smouldering embers, and when the charcoal burner came out of his clay hut, his face blackened and his eyes catching the light of the fire, I thought it was the Evil One himself."

Phoebe had dropped off into a nap.

"Yet, he was a fascinating fellow," said Aunt Agatha, addressing herself to Lady Shadrow. "He lived so much in the forest that he was part of the fur and feathered life. The birds came to him at a call; the rabbits allowed him to stoop and touch them. I don't think that I have ever envied anyone so much as I envied that man. God forgive me! I distrust all humans. Where did I leave off, Virginia?"

"You were suspecting an ulterior motive for the planting of these trees, Agatha," said Lady Shadrow, "but I'm so glad that sweeter thoughts prevailed."

"I have a reason for every suspicion," said Aunt Agatha. "If ever you should be in Wiltshire, go to the parish of Lydiard Tregoze. On the estate there, you will find no tree other than oak. Why? Because the planter of them was proud of the national emblem? Not likely. The estates were given to the first Bolingbroke by the King for some service he had rendered the Crown. But the gift was conditional. Bolingbroke was to reap only three crops. He planted acorns."

Phoebe opened one eye.

"If only we could have thought of something like that," she said and sighed.

Reginald and Sadie returned from their walk in the wood. The bailiff, on his way back to the little camp, spoke to them.

"You are with this party?"

"You're a thought reader," said Reginald.

"Sir John's compliments, and he will be honoured

PRIDE SITS IN THE BACK SEAT

if Sir Thomas Shadrow and his friends will come along to the hall and enjoy his hospitality."

"Hell!" said Reginald. "Who's told him that Sir Thomas is here?"

The bailiff affected ignorance. Reginald made his decision.

"Thank Sir John," he said, "but tell him that having started on a long journey it might not be a kindness to Sir Thomas to ask him to retrace his steps."

"Very good, *sir*," said the bailiff.

"That man," said Sadie, as she watched him ride away, "knows a little more than we think."

"I haven't the pleasure of knowing Sir John," said Reginald, "but I'll bet you a 'grand' that he doesn't belong to Sussex."

"How come, brother?"

"The Sussex people will forgive anything but poverty. Even the pater hates himself."

"The invitation was sincere?"

"Obviously," said Reginald, "but it would have hurt him all the same. Trouble of his sort isn't half so hard to fight if you can cut the self-pity out. He would have been reminded of all he's lost if he had accepted."

"Didn't you tell me there was a kind of freemasonry among baronets? Isn't there an association that sort of looks after them when they're knee-deep in trouble?"

Reginald sighed heavily.

"Sadie, when I was wearing my feet out on the pavement of Broadway, did you hear of any association of baronets sobbing on my shoulder? Babe, England likes to *talk* about her traditions, but she just won't stand for anybody trading on them."

Hogan came guiltily from the wood to where the two were standing. His coat scarcely concealed the pheasant he brought with him.

"Simple, Mr. Reginald," he said. "Horse hair sticking out each side of the raisin. He can't resist raisins and he can't get this one down: it chokes him."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Poacher," said Reginald, indignantly.

"And Sir John so ready to show us hospitality," said Sadie.

"And pheasants are out of season," said Reginald.

"That's only a matter of taste, sir," said Hogan.

"This one's full grown."

"Such a beautiful bird to be destroyed so foully," said Sadie.

"And Sir John so kind—so kind," said Reginald.

"Take it back, Hogan, and apologize."

"Like hell he will," said Sadie. "Stow it in the trailer, Hogan . . . Reggie, how many times have I told you that you'll never get rich until you rid yourself of sentiment."

It was late in the afternoon when the horses were harnessed up and *The House With the Golden Windows* resumed its rumbling along the road.

CHAPTER VI

TRADITION WALKS WITH A LIMP

THERE was a beautiful atmosphere of peace and resignation within the caravan. The song of the iron-tyred wheels lulled the occupants to sleep.

Portly Aunt Agatha had abandoned all pretence to dignity and was seated on the floor, her head resting against the bunk on which Phoebe was lying: the fat Peke, Wung, turned on its back—a characteristic of its tribe—and slept in that position.

Lady Shadrow reclined in the wicker chair, an open book on her knee, a smile of contentment showing behind her closed eyelids.

Sir Thomas faced his sister, Agatha; his head was tilted back; and he snored to the discomfort of no one save the Peke, which turned its head slightly now and then, and frowned resentfully, as these Oriental gentlemen will on occasion.

Harold had returned to his place in the trailer: he suffered Hogan to assist him in checking some statistics he was compiling with the object of showing that the prevailing bank-rate was a direct menace to industrial progress. Harold had a disturbing habit of talking aloud to himself in the midst of his studies. His thoughts were of the future of the country, when he asked of nobody:

“Whither are we drifting?”

Hogan was grateful for what he believed to be the thaw. He looked out of the trailer.

“We’re on the London Road, making for Reigate, then on to Epsom, I suppose.”

“Ree-ally!”

“Epsom Downs on Derby Day.” Hogan shook his

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

head to imply that there was nobody in the world who could teach *him* anything about the Derby. "I knew a chauffeur who had a half-share in a Derby sweep ticket, sir. The year Aboyeur won it after an objection. Remember, sir? (No answer.) This chauffeur fellow had the Craigan-something ticket, and old 'Craig' was first past the post. The chauffeur—Natty Noall was his name—had been taken into Tattersall's by his guv'nor, who knew he had the ticket——"

"But what about the Colonial attitude?" Harold mused. "Are we altogether happy in our possessions?"

"—and Natty and the guv'nor were side by side as the horses passed the stand. '*We've* won!' shouted the guv'nor."

"Did you speak?" said Harold, a sound having broken through the walls within which he was reshaping the destiny of the Empire.

"No," said Hogan, misunderstanding. "I could see what was coming. The favourite had been lying on Aboyeur for half a furlong. 'Who's won?' said Natty and gave his hat a bit of a twist. 'Why, *we* have,' said the guv'nor. 'You mean *I* have,' said Natty. 'Where the hell do you come in?' Get the idea, Mr. Harold? Then came the disqualification and Natty changed his tune. '*We've* had hard luck, sir,' he said to his guv'nor, and the sweat was running down the sides of his nose. '*You've* had hard luck,' said his guv'nor. 'Get to hell out of here and don't let me see your ugly face again.' There, sir. I've often thought there was a whole novel packed into those few minutes. What do you think, Mr. Harold?"

"I beg your pardon. Were you speaking to me?"

"Why, yes, sir. I was telling you about the Derby when Aboyeur won."

"Do I know this Mr. Aboyeur? Does Sir Thomas number him among his acquaintances?"

"Aboyeur was a racehorse, Mr. Harold."

"Was that my fault?"

TRADITION WALKS WITH A LIMP

"Of course not, sir. I was only telling you——"

"Did I ask you to tell me anything, Hogan?"

"I thought you might be interested, sir?"

"Hogan, if fifty racehorses named Aboyeur took it in turns to kick you in the stomach I should be less interested than if you suddenly learned how to perform your duties without taking too much for granted."

Hogan said nothing, but every injury done to Erin during the long years of her travail cried out for vengeance.

On the driver's seat, Sadie and Reginald sat close together.

"Who would ask for speed after enjoying this, boy?"

"Wait till we've had a month of it, Sadie."

"Boy, I'll stand a year or two of this. Just show me your England like you were an honest-to-goodness rubberneck, and I'll be happy. This one of your main roads?"

"Yes. London to Brighton, girl. Just fifty-two miles of it and every foot crammed full of romance."

The tilt of the caravan urged her gently towards his shoulder: she let her head rest there: he held his head slightly to one side so that his left cheek lay against her hair. Twilight was gone; they had ambled slowly along since leaving the Ifield Woods: the purple velvet blanket high above their heads was sprinkled with diamond dust, every speck a beacon, a hope. The rumble of the wheels wove itself into a melody: the "clinkety-clank" of the horses' hoofs was like the rhythmical tapping of the jazz drummer's sticks. Clinkety-clank! Clinkety-clank! Slow and steady and musical. Those within the caravan and the fellows on the tail-board of the trailer were quite content to leave everything to the guiding spirit holding the reins.

"Romance," said Sadie, and sighed wistfully. "What is romance, sweetheart?"

Reggie had a provoking habit of leading one up the

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

garden path then abruptly saying "Good night" and closing the door.

"Your hair smells like hay," he said. "Beautiful hay."

"I washed it this morning," said Sadie. "Did you hear what I said just now?"

"That is romance," said Reggie. "Nice clean hair, plenty of nice clean baths, everything smelling like the morning wind—that's romance, old girl. Do you know, I never look at a beautiful girl without saying to myself: 'Has she, or has she not? If she hasn't I'm sorry I've wasted my eyesight on her.'"

"Hasn't—what?"

"Bathed that morning," said Reggie, with ridiculous gravity.

Sadie sighed again, then sat upright.

"You were telling me about this Brighton Road and its romance," she prompted. "Go right ahead—I can bear it."

"If you were to come along here during the weekend," said Reggie, "you would say that the devil had two of his lieutenants stationed at each end of the fifty mile stretch—people race backward and forward in a cloud of dust. Just like the Boston-New York Road. Millions and millions of motor-cars and nobody inside of them ever sees the beauties of this road. What a history! The old coaching days. The 'Corinthians' with their high-steppers. They used to race down to Brighton, wheel to wheel, splashing through the fords across the roadway, yelling their challenge, taking risks at every turn and——"

"Where's the romance come in?"

"And there were highwaymen."

"Gangsters? Bootleggers?"

"Yes. There are a few of them about now, but you'll generally find 'em in the public-houses on the side of the road. The police do a bit of it, too."

"How come, brother?"

TRADITION WALKS WITH A LIMP

"They 'touch' you for a trifle if you're speeding."

"Oh, boy, behave yourself. We in the States think a mighty lot of your police."

"Yes, I know that bit, too. Every darn' American who gives an interview trots out the old, old story. 'What impressed me most was the magnificence of your police.' Oh, kid, it gives me a pain."

"Get back to those 'Corinthians', Reggie. Give me the low-down."

"England's pride and glory, Sadie. They were the lads of the village. Gambled all they knew, ran their own prize-fighters, eloped with their friends' wives, were rich to-day and poor to-morrow."

"Did they ever work, Reggie?"

"Don't wake me up, baby. I was just getting romantic. Those fellows got every ounce of fun out of life. They thought nothing of backing a horse to win 'em fifty thousand, and if the horse lost they didn't plead the Gaming Act and wriggle out of their debt."

"Reggie, I'm getting in dutch . . . I don't follow it."

"Horse-racing, Sadie—playing the horses, as you call it. These fellows would go up to a bookmaker and give him a nod. That meant 'I'll have five thousand on Corn Stealer for this race.' And the bookmaker would nod back and say: 'That's okay with me, m'lord. You can have ten's that horse, and if it wins there'll be a cheque for fifty thousand on your breakfast-table next Monday.'"

"Why Monday, Reggie? Was that to give the poor mutt time to get out of the country if it lost?"

"You're thinking of Americans, my dear," said Reggie. "When a 'Corinthian' lost, he paid—if he could. If he lost he shot himself like a gentleman."

"Like a quitter, you mean, boy. If he shot himself how did the bookmaker know where to send in the account?"

"You argue against romance, Sadie. There was the

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

case of the Marquis of Hastings. He was a Don Juan, a reg'lar fellow. If he had lived in these days he would have gone to Hollywood and there would have been no picture-making. The girls would have been too busy to attend the studio. Fine type of English gentleman, Sadie. He backed a horse called Hermit. It belonged to his hated rival, the husband of the woman he loved. Aren't husbands the cat's pyjamas, Sadie?"

"Pull into the side of the road, big boy, or there'll be a collision with an automobile. What about this Hermit?"

"The Marquis had been having a pretty tough break," said Reggie, "and the husband of the lady had a stout hope that he might make it tougher for the lad. He encouraged him to back another horse in that year's Derby, let him believe that if it didn't start until the others were half-way home it would streak past 'em and win easy. The Marquis fell for the dope . . ."

"Must you speak in a foreign tongue, dear man?"

"Ghee! It's your language, Sadie."

"No, we sold it to you long ago. I like you to talk English—'ritzy' English. It sounds so—so dam' silly, but so nice."

"The Marquis," said Reggie, "backed the other horse to the tune of about three hundred thousand dollars or thereabouts. The Hermit wasn't considered a starter, you might say. The day was wicked—just like an Easter Bank Holiday when the poor people have to go to the seaside whether they like it or they don't. It was snowing, my dear. And in June! The first Wednesday in June is Derby Day—all the rest of the days in the year don't count with the English. Well, this horse Hermit was a moralist, an awful prude. He must have known that the Marquis had backed the favourite so that he could elope with the shrinking violet who had poured her troubles into his ear. You know what these married women are when you get them talking about the husbands who don't understand

TRADITION WALKS WITH A LIMP

'em. Well, old Hermit wasn't condoning anything of that sort. He started badly by bursting a blood vessel. That must have been through annoyance with the Marquis. But he came around that course like a tornado and won. The Marquis had lost every cent he possessed——"

"And what he owed the bookmaker?"

"Exactly. But don't let go your hold on romance, my dear. Don't spoil a good story by being practical. He lost, all right, but he took the blow like a true gallant who knows when he's down for the full count."

"He went back to work—eh?"

"He went home and shot himself," said Reggie.

Sadie sighed again.

"And so the poor bookmaker got none—eh?" she said.

"But think of the romantic situation."

"For me," said Sadie, sententiously, "there would be precious little romance in a corpse that owed me a fortune."

Reggie gave the reins an impatient shake.

"I want you to absorb the fine old traditions of this country," he said. "We're jolly proud of our traditions of England. It's about all we've got left to be proud of, but that's beside the point. You people in the States have no traditions: you'll admit that. You envy us ours. Come! Be fair."

"We don't overlook them," said Sadie, "but if they're so priceless we wonder you don't sell a few and stop squealing about your poverty."

"Are we going to wrangle about that dam' War debt?"

"I like wrangling with you, Reggie; it's so lovely making up again. Personally, I get a big laugh out of those traditions, and a laugh is worth a mighty lot of money in these days."

"Look at English history, kid."

"What with, Reggie? A microscope or a pair of smoked glasses?"

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Compare your history with it. There was Abraham Lincoln, I know, but compare him with—with Nelson, if you like."

"Nelson is your star turn, Reggie—eh?"

"He beat the French at Trafalgar," said Reggie as pompously as though he had rendered his little service in that memorable encounter.

"Be fair, boy—be fair. Why fling all the bouquets at Nelson? Where does Mr. Hardy come in?"

"Hardy? Hardy, my dear? . . . Dam' that motorist. He was yards on his wrong side of the road."

"Yes, Hardy—the gentleman Nelson asked for a kiss."

"Sadie!"

"I'm dead serious, Reggie."

"It was the way you said that—the inflection of the voice."

"Sorry, he-man. That's how it reads to us in America. You and I have talked this matter out before."

"Whatever you do in this country, Sadie, don't make a jest of our traditions. An Englishman will stand any sort of insult save that."

"Take the chip off your shoulder," said Sadie. "How do you get like that? Where do you pull that stuff? You weren't sprinkling lavender water on Abraham Lincoln just now; why should I waste good sentiment on your Nelson. Didn't he ask Hardy to kiss him as he lay dying in the cockpit, or wherever it was?"

"You mustn't take the historians too seriously, Sadie. They are compelled to slip in a few human touches to make their books sell."

"Yes, but it's those very bits that pass into the language, as you might say. Don't the kiddies at school have them pumped into them? 'Kiss me, Hardy.' And Wellington praying: 'Would to God that night or Blucher would come?' And didn't Harold and his army pass the night in prayer while William of Normandy was sharpening his arrow heads?"

TRADITION WALKS WITH A LIMP

"Steady, Sadie. You are going too far. Those traditional sayings are jewels in the Empire's crown. Don't overlook that fact."

"I'm not disputing it, Reggie."

"If—if the pater heard you speak in that disrespectful tone he would faint away and we should have to bury him in the first cemetery we came across."

"Oh, yes," said Sadie, clutching at the reins to draw the horses from the middle of the road. "That's the principal disease Sir Thomas is suffering from—Tradition. Cure him of that and we'll make a new man of him in no time."

Reggie was shaking his head in a challenging manner.

"It was the way you said those things," he persisted.

"There was no reverence in your voice."

"I don't reverence anything in which I don't believe," said Sadie. "That may be due to my upbringing."

"Yes, I wanted to suggest that, but I feared to hurt your feelings," said Reggie. "Now, if we had been talking about——"

"About pork, for instance," said Sadie.

"I was trying to put it delicately."

"Why? You English are never happy unless you're spilling wisecracks about our worship of dollars, but if you can tell me of anything that's more worth while than dollars in this cold world I'd like to hear of it and—and I'll pass it on to Sir Thomas in the caravan."

"But you were not being fair to our history, Sadie. I'm not exactly aggrieved, but I feel that you were hitting at me."

"I was trying to defend the Almighty," said Sadie, gravely. "Your historians seem to make Him their stand-by. Come on, now. Let's look at it without prejudice. There was a piece in your newspapers the other day that may have pleased Sir Thomas mightily but it got my goat. One of your generals was telling how things were done in the War, and he spilled this lovely gem in his story of how he and the other officers

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

drew up their plans for slaying : 'By God's help, gentlemen, we have decided on our plan of action. I now propose to smash the enemy with one hammer blow.' "

"Well, what's wrong with that?" Reggie asked in wide-eyed wonder. "It was a jolly fine thing to say."

The oil-burning side lamps of the caravan offered her no help as she turned to study his face : the two of them were in comparative darkness as they sat there, side by side. She pinched his left arm to compel his attention.

"Jolly fine," she echoed, contemptuously. "Answer me this, sap : Where does the Almighty stand if all these prayers and petitions misfire? Why should anybody—even an Englishman—expect the Almighty to stand in his corner and help him slam the other man all over the ring? And if the Almighty doesn't lend a hand to a general who wants to strike a hammer blow at the enemy—if the Almighty happens to be listening to the petition of the enemy—where does the Almighty stand in the opinion of your general? The greatest trouble in you English is your unctuousness."

Reggie said : "Unroll me a stick of gum, honey, and slip one into your own talk-box—that should keep you quiet."

Sadie obeyed—so far as his needs were concerned.

"You were talking about the romance of this Brighton Road," she said cheerfully, all trace of argumentativeness gone. "I was getting all 'het up' about it till you started me firing."

"There have been great happenings on this road," said Reggie, "and they'll be repeated. Some of the gamest prize-fighters that ever threw a hat in the ring came down to the South Coast to meet their patrons and arrange their fights. One champion stayed a night at Crawley and lounged into a public-house there. The local blacksmith jostled him unintentionally as he reached for his tankard of ale. The champion gave

TRADITION WALKS WITH A LIMP

him a nudge in the ribs to teach him manners and the 'smith gave the champion a welt across the cheek with the back of his hand. 'Come outside,' said the 'smith, 'and I'll larn 'ee not to meddle wi' a Sussex lad.' The crowd in the tap-room told the blacksmith he was a fool to be so venturesome. 'He's the champion fighter of all England,' they said. 'He ain't met me yet,' said the 'smith. Out they tumbled into the street and the fight began. Within ten minutes they were carrying the champion away on a window shutter: he was half-pulverized by the novice . . . Well?"

"Sorry, big boy. I tried to make that a quiet yawn. Didn't you mention elopements when you began these reminiscences?"

"Down this road they'd come," said Reggie. "No motor-cars in those days, but they'd hire the fastest horses they could get and the old coach would rock and sway——"

"And the lovers would be clinging tightly to each other? Go right on, Reggie."

"And the angry father of the girl would be in pursuit, astride the swiftest horse in his stable. And he'd draw abreast the coach and level his pistol, and shout: 'Stop, villain! You shall not rob me of my only daughter.'"

"Oh, Reggie. How beautiful!"

"And the lover would yell to the driver of the coach: 'On! A thousand guineas if you reach the coast.'"

"And to hell with poppa, Reggie! Eh? Go on, honey."

"Bang! The old father would let fly with his pistol and hit something in the next county. Bang! The lover would fire back and startle the sleeping birds in the nearest rookery."

"Wasn't anybody hurt, Reggie?"

"Very seldom, Sadie, and then it was by accident. Generally the pursued and pursuer fetched up in a village public-house and sank a couple of bottles of port wine. Still, it was all good fun while it lasted."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Do you believe that any parent would try to prevent a daughter marrying if she had the chance?"

"It does sound a trifle improbable," said Reggie, "but that's how the story goes. We're saner nowadays. More practical, too. If the average daughter ran away with a lover her father would stand on guard to prevent anybody following them."

"True, brother, true," said Sadie, in a tired voice. "Romance is nearly dead. Ghee, I'm sleepy. Let me rest my head against your shoulder." He rubbed his cheek against hers. "'Member the night we sat near the water's edge at Sound Beach, Reggie? And I let you kiss me?"

"Made me, Sadie."

"And you talked about England when I wanted you to talk of love."

"I had to talk about something to head you away."

"You raved about England and said I hadn't lived because I hadn't seen it."

"An Englishman always talks like that when he's abroad, Sadie. When he's home he passes his time cussin' the place."

"You said English women were noted for their beauty," said Sadie.

"You said you'd been taught that all English women had protruding teeth and scraggy hair."

"Wore woollen stockings and had big feet."

"Hadn't you some quaint ideas about the English, Sadie?"

"I hope they were wrong, Reggie. Strange how we misjudge each other in this life. You gave me a totally wrong impression of your people. Tell me, funny man, have you any idea what's likely to be the outcome of this expedition?"

"Frankly, I haven't, Sadie."

"You're going through with it?"

"To the bitter end. I was perfectly sincere when I

TRADITION WALKS WITH A LIMP

told you that the family is down to its last handful of corn."

"Poppa could fix things, Reggie. You know that."

"Sadie, the moment you're tired of the outfit you can quit."

"And leave you? Boy, I'd rather leave the world for good. I'm going to love every minute of it. But there's your mother—sweetest of sweet women."

"An angel, Sadie, but her wings have been tied. All her life she has been shackled with a title. She's never known the joy of being poor—and free."

"And Aunt Agatha? She's dreadfully English—isn't she?"

"I'm building a good many hopes on Aunt Agatha," said Reggie. "She may belong to the old school of English snobbery, but I fancy there's something really worth while in her. Like all perfect English ladies, she hates the common herd, but that's only a pose. When she has roughed it a few months she'll realize the folly of what we call class distinction——"

"And Harold?"

"I'm banking on Harold," said Reggie decisively. "There, Sadie, you have a wellnigh perfect specimen of dignity run to seed. We must save Harold before it's too late. If it hadn't been for this slump in Shadrow stock, Harold might have gone in for the Church, which is unthinkable, or into Parliament, which is worse. You and I may do great things for the lad. Shall we call it a day, old girl?"

"And change the topic? As you wish, Reggie."

He moved his head slightly so that his lips could touch hers.

"It's a glorious night, kid."

"Heavenly."

"Love me?"

"Adore you, boy."

"I wonder why?"

"You're such a helpless mutt, Reggie."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"A woman doesn't love a fellow because he's helpless or a mutt, Sadie."

"Does she ever know why she loves him?"

"You've called me dreadful names at one time and another?"

"Because I loved you, I suppose."

"I took that for granted."

"That's what hurts a woman most—being taken for granted."

"One name you called me I shall never forget."

"Darling, tell me and I'll take it back."

"Yes. I'm going to make you do that in my own time. You called me 'an old cheap'."

"Just in fun, big boy."

"Maybe, but it happened to be raining that day and I felt cheap. If the sun had been shining I wouldn't have cared a hang."

"Reggie! You've been hoarding this up. You're 'mad' with me?"

"I believe I love you."

"Believe? Is that all?"

"Oh, you mustn't take my love for granted, either."

"Here! Stop the horses and let's have this out."

"Why pollute the horses' ears? Lift your head from my shoulder: you're weakening my resolution."

"That sounds good to me, Reggie."

"A quarrel is the tonic that keeps Romance together, Sadie."

"Reggie, you're making me nervous. You haven't been drinking anything—have you? Hooch, I mean?"

"There you go. Whenever a man tries to be serious, the woman always conceives of an idea that may prove him to be insane."

"Reggie, is this all—all boloney?"

"Meaning moonshine? No, not exactly."

"Let's call it a day."

"Thank you, Sadie."

"Don't be so dam' polite."

TRADITION WALKS WITH A LIMP

"Second round. Seconds out of the ring."

"If you really want a quarrel, I'm game. There's something on your mind?"

"There is. When you gave me that sandwich in the wood to-day, I told you there was too much mustard on it. You insisted that it would do me good."

"Has that been rankling in your mind ever since?"

"Absolutely. Why should you dictate to me about the mustard I take? Are you as familiar with my inside as I am?"

"Stop the horses, I say, and let me get down. If we're going to start like this where do we finish?"

"Where will you go if you get down? Back to the States?"

"That's my business. So! This is your English dignity. Fancy getting raw because I asked you to eat that mustard. Is this the sort of family I've taken to?"

"This sort of family took to you, Sadie."

"Crazy lot of old cheaps."

"Thank you, again. I knew that was still in your mind."

"I'm not going to cry."

"I don't care whether you do or you don't."

"I believe you mean every word you say."

"Words are too precious to waste on a woman."

"Don't come your cave-man stuff on me."

"I think you stand in need of it."

"I think I hate you."

"Excellent! . . . Do you think you could light a cigarette for me so that I needn't let go the reins?"

"Ghee, Reggie. You were fooling all the time?"

"No sob stuff, Sadie. It may be all right in America, but in England we pride ourselves on our phlegm."

"Why—why did you start all this boloney?"

Reggie kissed her before she put the cigarette between his lips.

"Just to show you how easy it is to start a quarrel, kid," he said.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"And you had me guessing! Reggie?"

"Umps."

"I've got an idea. If ever we should flare up with each other and it looks like the whole works were going up in the explosion, we'll have a word, a magic word, that shall bring us back to our senses. It won't matter who says it, but the moment it's out there'll be a pause, an armistice, and . . ."

"Spill that word, babe."

"'Boloney'."

"Topping idea. Sadie, kiss me again and say you're sorry you began this shermozzle."

"I didn't begin it."

"You did."

"'Boloney'."

"Ah! That *is* the way to kiss a fellow."

The caravan rumbled on. Within, Sir Thomas Shadrow sat by the side of Virginia's chair, his cheek resting against the blue-veined hand that trailed over the arm-rest. Aunt Agatha had fallen asleep, the Peke on her knee; Phoebe was lying on the bunk and staring at the roof.

From the trailer came the sound of Hogan's voice raised in song. He was challenging the authority of Harold the austere; indeed he was spoiling for a fight and he didn't care with whom it might be:

"When are you going to marry me?
I should like to know;
For every time I look in your eyes
I feel I want to go
Around the corner, by the trees . . ."

Harold remained strangely appreciative.

"That's an excellent song, Hogan," said he; "or it may be that the night air has made me unusually tolerant. Let me try it. How does it go?"

Hogan was horribly discouraged. He lapsed into a silence that would have made a Connemara bog seem like a cabaret by comparison.

TRADITION WALKS WITH A LIMP

In a sheltered corner of a Common near Banstead Downs, the party halted for the night. Reginald took command and Sadie was his adjutant. All hands save the beloved invalid, Lady Shadrow, were summoned to the apportioning of duties: her chair was brought to the open doorway of the caravan so that she might watch the others at work. Reggie and Sadie knew their jobs; Harold and Phoebe were eager to learn theirs; Sir Thomas, intent on setting Hogan a shining example, trotted to and fro with all the futility of that clown at the circus who pretends to help the "hands" in the clearing of the ring.

Aunt Agatha was intensely annoyed with the seeming readiness of her titled brother to sink to the level of a gipsy. She sat on an upturned bucket and for a while watched the others in silence. She told herself that the jest, for her, had reached its limit. The innate snobbery she had fostered since girlhood refused to allow her to reason that poverty demands the sacrifice of at least a little pride. Her imagination was quickened by the spectacle of Sir Thomas breaking dead wood across his knee at the behest of Hogan, who was lighting a fire on the ground. In fancy, she could see the ghosts of cynical friends peering through the darkness. The disdain with which she had always treated Hogan changed to vindictiveness: in some unaccountable way she associated him with all the misfortune that had befallen the house of Shadrow. She told herself that he was secretly elated. He was saying to himself that his time had come. The atavistic strain of the French Revolutionary was asserting itself. The rumbling of the tumbrils was in his ears; the smell of the guillotine's blood-stained blade was in his nostrils. That gleam in his eyes as he passed through the firelight. It was the expression of the assassin, the thug who waits politely on the victim until the moment is come to strike the fatal blow. That lean, saturnine face with its twitching nostrils. Couldn't the others see all that

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

was so patent to her? Why did they accept him as a friend when treachery dwelt in every line of his face?

Hogan looked up from the fire which he was feeding with sticks gathered by Sir Thomas: the others were out of earshot—Virginia had moved back into the caravan. Hogan looked steadily, calculatingly, at Aunt Agatha: he looked away from her to mark the whereabouts of the other members; he looked back again at her and she was held fascinated by the speck of fire in his eyes. He moved towards her with the hesitant, uncanny action of the miscreant who has not quite decided whether to stab or strangle. She didn't stir nor call out for help. He stood over her—a threatening, fearsome figure. He spoke in a tone of voice that was unnatural in him:

"M'lady, I want that bucket."

She managed to speak, but in a terrified whisper.

"Why, Mr. Hogan? Why?"

"Sanitation, m'lady," said Hogan, and blushed.

Aunt Agatha rose with dignity and took Wung, the Peke, for a walk. There may be moments in the life of each one of us when the sound of a buzz-saw is sweeter than the liquid notes of a harp: this was one of them for Aunt Agatha. All the stars in the blue Vault seemed to smile down on her. And she smiled back.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST NIGHT IN THE OPEN

THERE is no more magical adventure than the first night passed in the open with a camp fire glowing in friendliness and the stars looking down in envy. It is in the crowded town or city, when your pockets are empty, that the sense of isolation weighs most heavily and crushes down the pride that is supposed to spring from individuality.

In the city, if you are poor, the half of your misery lies in pretending that you are not. In the open country, with the sky for a roof and the earth for a pillow, the very spirit of happiness demands that you shall be poor before it will admit you into the glories of its sanctuary. You can't fool the Wild by *pretending* to make love to her. You may be clad in rags and as unkempt as a cat that's been caught in a thunderstorm, but if you possess that golden key which can readmit you to the so-called comforts you've left behind whenever you choose to go, the Wild has no sympathy to waste on you. It's all or nothing with her.

If you're lying between your blankets with a well-filled wallet in the pocket of your belt, she'll open her floodgates and wash you out for the impostor that you are. If you possess no more than a hope that to-morrow will provide a meal, she will hang the night with stars and command her zephyrs to lull you to sleep. She will lift from your heart the dead load of worry, free you from the shackles of conventional responsibility, sing to you of the glories of health and the true dignity of labour, cleanse your very soul of the pettinesses that hold it in thrall, and make you king of the mightiest kingdom known to man—the kingdom which is yourself.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

The first evening meal in the open was the greatest adventure the Shadrow party had known thus far. A few miles northward, processions on wheel and afoot were slowly converging on Epsom Downs for the great classic horse-race on the morrow. No matter what his creed, his prejudices, or his politics, an Englishman thinks of Derby Day as one of the divine tasks included in the Six Days of Labour that marked the inception of the earth and every living thing. It is the one day in the year when the sin of gambling loses its reproach, even for the bigot who rails against betting during the other three hundred and sixty-four days of the year.

The Shadrows were camped just outside the radius that is known as "Epsom" in a racing sense. When they set out on their pilgrimage, the Derby was farthest from their thoughts. It was just Fate that led the wanderers on towards the Mecca of sport, as it leads business men, politicians, peers and commoners. They just happened to find themselves there. Why, many a bishop has been caught in that magnetic stream and carried on against his will and principles.

Sadie, the effervescent, superintended the cooking of the evening meal, but Reggie was the chef. He was so anxious to demonstrate the thoroughness of his training in a "hot-dog wagon".

Lady Shadrow, seated on the steps of the caravan, a shawl placed protectingly around her shoulders by Sir Thomas, watched the proceedings with unfeigned and child-like delight. The red glow of the wood fire imparted a curiously fascinating colour to her naturally pallid cheeks, her eyes appeared to be enlarged and rounded by the reflection; her hair, that had been prematurely silvered by the trouble and anxieties of the last few years, caught greedily at the glow and shone with all the magical splendour of spun gold.

Each of the other members of the party contributed to the task of preparing for the meal. Portly Aunt Agatha, praying that the ghosts of her fathers would

THE FIRST NIGHT IN THE OPEN

keep out of the way and insisting that never again would she know peace of mind until she joined poor "Gogo" in his grave, sliced the bacon though she loathed the smell of it. Phoebe washed potatoes and roasted them in the embers. Harold, the æsthetic, wandered away into a nearby copse and returned with bleeding hands, an air of profound gravity, and a hedgehog. Somewhere, he said, he had read of the gipsies rolling "these jolly little fellows" in clay and roasting them over the fire. When the clay was thoroughly baked it should be broken away and it would take with it the skin and quills, leaving a porcine delicacy the like of which a gourmet could not imagine.

No one appeared to be mightily intrigued by this erudition, for the meal was nearly ready and an appetizing aroma floated upward and outward. From the manner in which Aunt Agatha glanced at the pot, it was easy to divine that the disciples of dieting were not being encouraged. Lady Shadrow, still seated on the steps of the caravan, was trying to recall the last meal she had taken—it seemed that years had passed since indigestion suffered her to be like an ordinary human being. Phoebe was a picture of content and grime, but she didn't appear to care.

Harold accepted their indifference to his effort with his usual calm, and placed the hedgehog on an upturned box as one who lays aside a book with the intention of returning to it later. Here, then, was a setting as romantic and peaceful as any that poet might have conceived. And it generally happens that when one has reached the perfection of bliss some silly little incident obtrudes itself and tumbles everything into chaos. Great joys should never be prolonged.

In the uncertain light, Sir Thomas sat on the box where the hedgehog had been placed by his first-born. Now, excessive dignity is never natural—it is cultivated. When the elegant is taken off his guard by some untoward incident, he leaps straight back to the primitive

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

to prove it. Sir Thomas yelled : "Hell ! I'm stabbed !", sprang high in the air and came down full on the shoulders of Aunt Agatha. She rolled over under the impact and the hedgehog happened to have rolled to the spot where she fell with the laudable intention, maybe, of breaking her fall. Her shriek of pain stirred Sadie's noblest instincts : believing that Aunt Agatha had fallen on the embers and set fire to her clothes she picked up a bucket of water and flung the contents over her. Labouring under the delusion that she had fallen overboard into a rough sea, Aunt Agatha began to strike out with the fixed determination not to drown without making a fight for it. Hogan, who had stooped to rescue her, received a violent blow on the nose, whereupon he retired to a safe distance and asked all the Saints in his Calendar why the devil he had allowed himself to be inveigled into touring with a band of lunatics.

Reggie and Sadie managed to restore matters to a semblance of peace, but the meal had been robbed of its right flavour. Throughout all the commotion, Harold hadn't stirred a hand, nor did he appear to be disturbed in mind. Yet he was the first to speak when quiet came.

"I believe," he said, "that the Romany word for the thing is 'hotchiwitchi'." He moved from his place and critically examined the hedgehog. "Extraordinary," he said, "how these little beggars breed fleas !"

The arranging of sleeping quarters was not completed without altercation. Aunt Agatha stubbornly refused to tolerate the stuffy atmosphere of the caravan : there was a spot of the Spartan in her somewhere, and she assured them that she preferred a small bell tent.

Hogan had anticipated this : he nodded at Reginald as to say : "I thought as much : let her have her way."

Lady Shadrow, Phoebe, and Sadie had the bunks within the caravan ; there were small bell tents for the men.

THE FIRST NIGHT IN THE OPEN

The women retired early; Hogan, still smarting under the blow he had received, said he would take a short stroll before turning in; and he wandered away into the darkness. He fancied that about a mile from the camp he had seen a wayside inn that looked uncommonly hospitable; there might be another wayfarer there with some knowledge of which horse was likely to win the Derby on the following day. Hogan hadn't a deal of money to speculate but he had ideas of how it might be made without unduly exerting himself. Now that he had come down to the level of the crowd, as he put it, he was not conscious of any irksome restraint: indeed, when he pondered the years of servitude in a county family he marvelled that he should have so insulted his manhood.

By the time he returned to the camp, Hogan was on speaking terms with the ghost of every king that had ruled Ireland. His thin face twitched to his emotions, one eyelid had become so heavy that it wanted to go to sleep before the other one was quite ready. When he spoke it was in a monotone, as though he feared that inflection might jeopardize the exquisite feeling of inertia to which the brown ale had reduced him.

He sat down on a box near the fire and Reggie glanced at Sir Thomas and winked. There was stillness in the air, a delightful balm rested on the camp; the fire had died down to grey ash.

Then came that ghastly, ear-splitting shriek from within the tent of Aunt Agatha. Before the men could get to their feet, she hurled herself out into the open, a weird, bulky figure, clad in what appeared to be a flannel sleeping suit.

"Hogan! Hogan! There's a squirrel in my bed!"

And Hogan spoke thickly and vindictively:

"Ay, m'lady, and at your time of life you ought to be thankful to find even a squirrel in your bed."

There are some vulgarisms that may be drowned by stony silence; some merit sterner treatment. Reggie

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

was not a Hercules, but every sinew in his body was as tough as Hogan's manners. He rose slowly to his feet, grasped his man by the coat collar, lifted him with ridiculous ease and dragged him to his tent; there he dropped him on his blankets, closed the flap of the tent and returned to the others who, by this time, had relieved Aunt Agatha's mind, save that she observed to no one in particular that she would be pleased to get into her coffin.

And so to bed. Lady Shadrow said good night to Sir Thomas with a beauty of sympathy that caused even the phlegmatic Harold to turn his back and stare at the stars. She was very brave about this adventure so far as she herself was concerned, but it was easy to see that she was troubled about him. After a lifetime of comparatively sybaritic luxury it is no easy thing for a man, advanced in years, to brush shoulders with poverty and pretend that it is no more than an incident in life. She looked from the window of the caravan and waved a hand. Reggie was showing his father into his tent. He was saying, cheerfully: "Up early in the morning, pater, and give me a hand with the brekker. You're going to love every minute of this jaunt. Get between the blankets and forget there is a world. Sleep like a gippo, and many a king will envy you."

Sadie sat on the edge of her bunk for quite half an hour after the other women had fallen asleep; she, too, was disturbed—but only by the whisper of young Romance. Out in the West she had read much about the atrociousness of the English climate, but she wished the chroniclers could sit with her in that camp. There was a crooning in the long dank grass of the common; in an isolated clump of trees on the hillside a few restive rooks grumbled at the discomfort of their nests; high up against the sombre canopy of night the stars looked down and laughed. From the far distance came the bark of a dog fox; it was taken up by the deeper-throated challenge of a tethered watch-dog. Then silence again.

THE FIRST NIGHT IN THE OPEN

A beautiful, sympathetic silence that made appeal to the sentiment in her young soul.

The embers of the camp fire had died out; the fragrance of the greenwood that was only half-burned floated to her and moved her emotionally. Silently she crept to the bottom of the caravan steps and crossed to where a grass-covered mound made a pillow against which she could rest her shoulders and gaze up at the stars.

In a little while, another figure came from a tent. Without warning her of his approach, he lay down beside her and with a simple movement she crooked her right arm so that his head might find a cradle. And when she spoke in a whisper all trace of the slang so repugnant to the breeding of Sir Thomas was absent. There was a tender wistfulness in the cadences, even the music of culture.

"Reggie, darling?"

"Sadie?"

"Life is full of beauty if we cleanse our eyes by first cleansing our mind."

"Your mind, Sadie, has always been sweet. You've done wonderful things for me."

"Have I, Reggie? It has been glorious helping you."

"Just couldn't have got along without you, Sadie."

A moment of silence.

"Reggie?"

"Yes?"

"Don't credit me with too much. Some other girl might have done more for you."

"Impossible. Move your arm just a little, sweetheart; I want to put mine under your neck."

"That's good to me," said Sadie.

"Tell me, did Phoebe say anything to you before we left the house? I feel rather worried about her."

"She was going to be engaged——"

"Yes, Harold told me. To young Carter. His people heard the pater had crashed and sent him around at the

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

double to back out of it. I feel quite sick about it, because Phoebe's a good little scout."

"She's a dear," said Sadie. "That's why I'm so glad this engagement was prevented. He couldn't have loved her if he allowed money to make all the difference."

"Quite right. But it was swinish of him."

"Money couldn't make any difference to—our love, Reggie?"

"Not likely. What a night, little girl!"

"Wonderful night," she agreed. "Who was it wrote: 'Yes, Life is sweet, brother. The sun, the moon, and the stars, and the wind on the heath'?"

"Cal. Coolidge."

"No. Don't be flippant. Don't slight a writer of such words."

"If I had written that," said Reggie, "I wouldn't have cared who forgot my name. They couldn't take all the joy away."

Sadie shifted her position so that she rested on an elbow and looked down on his face, now silvered in the light of the stars and the moon that had freed itself of cloud. His eyes had lost their whimsical expression; there was in them now the fine, clear light of ambition and the love of high adventure.

"I wish that everybody could see you as I see you, Reggie," she said tenderly.

"The fool of the family, Sadie," he reminded her.

"A very, very dear fool," said Sadie, as she bent down and pressed her lips to his. "Reggie, take me closer into your confidence. What is the big idea in your mind? Is it quite fair to Sir Thomas?"

"Quite fair, Sadie. If I could have returned with a fortune and placed it in his hand he wouldn't have been a bit more appreciative than he will be by the time we've triumphed on this adventure."

"Somehow, that doesn't sound right to me, Reggie. He's your father——"

"Sadie, the American is the most sentimental fellow

THE FIRST NIGHT IN THE OPEN

in the world, and America is the one country in the world where a fellow is taught the real value of sentiment. Before I met you I did some hard thinking and came to the conclusion that some parents are a deuce of a responsibility to their offspring. I'm terribly fond of the pater, but because I'm his son I'm not debarred from thinking for myself. Ever since he was born he has been encouraged to live on the reputation of his father and his grandfather before him. All his life he has browsed in a country place without pushing the old world forward an inch. Who decreed that he should live a life of ease—feed on the honey that others had collected?"

"Boy, that's rank Bolshevism."

"If it is, then Bolshevism is better than I've been led to believe it. The pater had never done a stroke of work until he set out with us on this pilgrimage. He has sat on the Bench of County magistrates, passed sentences and inflicted fines. Why?"

"Because he was chosen as being the right man to hold the job," said Sadie, tentatively.

"Rubbish," said Reggie, the ingrate. "He was chosen because he happened to hold a title, a title for which he never did anything except agree to be born."

"Well, Harold will inherit the title—won't he? What have you to say about that?"

"Harold," said Reggie, grimly, "will have done something to merit the title if I have any say in the matter."

"I thought everybody loved a title," said Sadie.

"They do," said Reggie, "because everybody is a snob at heart. Personally, I agree with the bestowing of titles on the right people, but my idea of the right people happens to be the wrong idea in the opinion of society. The pater, bless his dear heart, takes on three inches of starchiness when he talks about the years his title goes back. He would be affronted if you asked him to regard a two-year-old baronetcy, bestowed for service to the country, as being equal to his own in dignity."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"I'm getting in 'dutch', Reggie. We're awfully democratic in the States, but, Lord! how we love titles."

"I say that no title should be inherited—that's all," said Reggie. "You mentioned Harold—what the devil has that big boob done as yet to merit a title?"

"Let's get back to that big idea in your mind."

"It's easy, Sadie. I came home to find the family on the rocks. The pater, in his heart, believes that he has been badly used by the fates. He thinks that because he has a moth-eaten title, the country should rush to his aid with its money-bags. It will do nothing of the sort: it will probably be delighted to learn that he's down and out. Snobbery changes to contempt more quickly than a swallow passing over a pool."

"I wouldn't have believed that you ever thought like this, Reggie."

"No. Even a clown has his serious moments, old girl, and perhaps his mind is all the clearer for the clowning he's done. The pater has been hit a hard blow but he isn't going to make it any easier to bear by damning the country in which he lives and the people around him. Why shouldn't a beggar without a title stand in the market-square and cry out: 'How dare you people let me sink to this level?' Believe me, Sadie, this tour is going to make a great man of Sir Thomas Shadrow. He doesn't know the England he likes to prate about when he's 'traditioning', as I call it. He has never troubled to inquire into the private life of the people in his own county town. He has taken it for granted that the Almighty singled him out for a throne on which he could look down on the crowd. He's going to look at England, now, and unless I'm mistaken he's going to be surprised to find how much there is in England to interest him. Sadie, he's going to work. He must. So must I. And Harold. And Phoebe—unless she makes marriage a leaning-post, and I've got a better opinion of her than that."

"Reggie, how much money have you got?"

THE FIRST NIGHT IN THE OPEN

"That's the way to talk, Sadie. Well, I've got less than three pounds, but I've got ideas that are going to be turned into cash. We have no reason to moan, dear girl. There are hundreds, even thousands of titled people in this country to-day who are afraid to go out of their grounds. Instead of going to bed and hoping for the dawn they lie awake in the dark and wish the dawn would never break."

"Go on, big boy. I love you in this mood."

"They do, Sadie. They haven't a bean and they don't appear to have any idea of making a bean. They are waiting for something to happen—something that will put them back into the old position of arrogant tin gods——"

"Steady, dear lad."

"Look here, honey, I've walked Broadway for weeks and weeks, hungry as a starved cat, and I learned a lot about human nature. These people I'm talking about would consider it an insult if a plebeian employer offered them an honest-to-God job. They would say it was an insult to the title they had inherited. I'll give you an instance of what I call arrogance in ragged pants. I know of a man in Sussex who made himself rich by working twelve hours a day for forty years. He nearly lost it all during the War, but he tightened his belt and almost sacrificed his eyesight in his labours. One day when he was resting after a fifteen-hour spell of driving work, a caller arrived and said he was a peer. He was. He was collecting subscriptions to an illustrated publication that was to commemorate some national event—I forget what it was exactly. He said, 'I'm going to put you down for a hundred guineas.' 'Thanks,' said the rich man. 'How much are you putting into it?' 'I'm only collecting subscriptions,' said the peer. 'To be quite frank, I have to do this to make an income.' 'And what do you get out of the subscriptions?' he was asked. 'Twenty-five per cent.' 'Show me a specimen of the book,' said the rich man. The peer said: 'I've

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

got a man outside with it. With your permission I'll call him in.' The man outside was an ex-Army captain, a poor devil who had been knocked about in France and was glad of any kind of a job. The peer introduced him as 'my assistant'. The specimen book was unwrapped, but the rich man who had laboured all his life didn't take much notice of it. He said to the young peer, 'Do you require an assistant to go around collecting subscriptions?' The peer dropped his lower jaw in amazement. 'You wouldn't expect *me* to carry that book about—would you?' There you are, Sadie. That's the sort of thing that seems to switch off the radio for me when I'm laughing with the comedians. Get me?"

"Sure, I get you," said Sadie. "Seems to me you're a mighty big piece of perplexity, but that only makes you the more interesting to me. Isn't the night good!"

"So's life, Sadie, come to think of it. And work. I know that if I went right through England to-day, begging for a job, I might not get one because of that dam' title, but I'm going to earn a livelihood. My only handicap is that I have not had any training in any sort of trade or profession. I couldn't put a split pin in the wheel of progress. But——"

"You've got——"

"Guts, old girl."

They stayed there in the open for another half-hour, then slipped quietly to their respective beds.

And Sir Thomas, who had watched and listened (for he couldn't help overhearing), pulled up the blankets around his shoulders and applied his mind to pondering all he had heard.

CHAPTER VIII

FINDING LEVELS IS TOUGH WORK

IT was really Hogan, the faithful servitor for twenty-five years, who convinced the indigent baronet that hypocrisy lies at the root of most of the virtues with which we are credited.

Morning had come—a crisp, clean morning, with the wind sweeping across the weald and carrying with it the scent of gorse and wild orchid. Phoebe and Aunt Agatha set out early for a long walk before breakfast which the men were to prepare. Sadie was in the caravan, putting things to rights, and keeping up a cheerful conversation with the invalid who had agreed to take her breakfast in bed. The chintz curtains of the caravan were drawn aside so that the sunshine might pour in; the geraniums in the swinging pots above the windows laughed in their crimson glory.

The camp fire was burning merrily, the kettle on its tripod was ready to sing with the lark overhead; tax-collectors, creditors, and other embarrassing adjuncts of society had faded away into nothingness. Less than three miles from where the camp was pitched lay the vast undulating arena whereon the greatest classic race of the year was to be run. The eyes of the world were focused, figuratively, on that course. The race would be decided at three o'clock, and three minutes after the horses passed the winning post the result would be known in every corner of the world.

The English are prouder of the Derby than of any other national weakness. They are very jealous of it, too. Parliament may vote a measure to keep them out of the cinema and the theatre on Sundays, or close their tobacco shops at a stated time, or prevent contributing

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

to a sweepstake under a fly-blown Act of Charles the Something, but when a man has set his heart on going to the Derby on the first Wednesday in June of each year only paralysis and blindness can keep him away.

Hogan, on the previous evening, had fallen in with the inevitable oracle who knew the "certainty" for the big race. Hogan had a few shillings which he felt he might turn into a few pounds if he could get to the side of a bookmaker. Hogan was conscious of the truth of that axiom about poverty levelling all men, and from a corner of his mind he drew out a recollection of the number of famous Irishmen who had helped to make the British Empire what it was. Anyway, Hogan had set his heart on going to Epsom Downs, but he hadn't yet found the courage to mention his desire to Sir Thomas. He was satisfied that there was bound to be a protest; therefore, he began the day by leading up to the crisis.

Reggie and Harold decided to walk to a neighbouring farm to purchase hay for the horses: they left Sir Thomas and Hogan laying out the breakfast things: they would be back in twenty minutes.

Sir Thomas, wearing a sweater and a courageous smile, wasn't exactly a picture of dignity, but the old rasp was still in his voice when he said:

"Hogan! Get a little more firewood."

Hogan was seated on the bottom step of the caravan. He threw up his head with a start, but the bell hadn't sounded for the round to begin, or he couldn't get his gloves to fit, or he hadn't worked up his emotions to the right pitch.

"Very good," he said, and ambled away. He returned with a few sticks of dead wood and dropped them carelessly by the side of the fire.

"Put them on the fire," said Sir Thomas peremptorily. "And don't sit down again until you have been given permission." He went into his tent to look for something with which to open a tin of preserves. He

FINDING LEVELS IS TOUGH WORK

had read no significance into the sullen mien of the servitor.

Hogan leaned against the side of the caravan and asked himself who was who and what was what in that camp. And would any of the blessed saints tell him why he should play the servant all his life to a bandy-legged, conceited little cock pheasant who had bullied him ever since the day the sergeant-major in India turned him over as a batman.

From Sir Thomas's tent came the inquiry :

"Are you there, Hogan?"

"Sure," said Hogan without moving. "Where did you think I was?"

"Take the can and slip across to the farm yonder for some milk—I knew we were short."

"Fetch the dam' milk yourself," said Hogan, shaking his head defiantly at the world although his mentor was in the tent behind him.

Sir Thomas came out quickly and stared in astonishment at the rebel.

"Was that really you speaking to me?" he asked.

"Och, I heard your yappin'," said Hogan, "but I was in no mind to take much notice."

"Hogan! You've been drinking?"

"Ay," said Hogan, "but not on the wages I get from the English aristocracy."

"Take that can and fetch the milk," Sir Thomas commanded, advancing a step. "That's plain English."

"And I say take the dam' thing yourself," said Hogan.

"That's plain Irish." He drew himself up with the alertness of a soldier on parade. His nostrils twitched ("the result of a wound on the field of battle, Agatha," Sir Thomas had said in rebuke of his sister); there was an ominous gleam in the Irish eyes. "And, look ye, Sir Thomas," said he, "I've been waiting twenty-five years for the courage to say all this to you."

A small head showed in the open window of the caravan, but neither master nor servant saw it. Sir

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Thomas stepped towards his man; his shoulders were braced; some recollection of his military training came back on the wings of the morning.

"Have you?" said he. "Then, I'll be equally frank with you. For twenty-five years I've endured that damnable sniff of yours. Take that, you Connemara thug."

Leaping in with a ludicrous imitation of a professional boxer, the little baronet hooked a hard right to the chin of the recalcitrant Hogan. Down he went.

From the window of the caravan came an encouraging cry.

"Attababy! You're the berries! I'll tell the world!"

A moment later, and Sadie, wearing a pyjama suit that would have dazzled the eyesight of a Broadway revue producer, came down the steps to the battleground.

"Hogan," she said, as he slowly regained his feet, "it isn't brave to wait till you're 'corned' before shaping up to an elderly gentleman. When my Reggie comes back you shall try on the gloves with him—just there, back of that clump of gorse. Now, pick up that milk can and slide to the farm. Slide, Kelly, slide! You poor, last week's fish."

Hogan picked up the can and made a bolt for it.

Sadie walked up to Sir Thomas after the manner of a referee in a boxing ring. She grasped him by the right wrist and raised his arm to an imaginary audience.

"Winner," she said, and went back into the caravan.

CHAPTER IX

DERBY DAY ADVENTURES

IF the affray with Hogan had been the only adventure in Sir Thomas's day, he might have remembered the Derby of that year as marking a signal triumph in his life. He had achieved the inestimable glory of striking his man and tasting the sweets of victory.

It is a curiously intriguing commentary on the frailty of human nature that the elucidating of a highly technical problem which must mean the betterment of man and the conditions in which he lives does not gratify the soul so completely as the unexpected ability to sock him on the jaw. Even men of extreme culture whose modesty blinds them to the magnitude of their achievements in science or industry will reiterate an instance of their physical and primitive prowess until their acquaintances are sick of hearing the story.

Sir Thomas had another and a more humiliating adventure, and it had its inception in a desire to prove that he was thoroughly capable of taking a man's part in the work of the camp.

Reginald and Harold returned to breakfast and learned from Sadie of all that had happened in their absence. Their volume of praise was unfeigned. Harold insisted that there had been no loss of dignity; Reginald reproached himself for having doubted that his father could take hold of life with both hands and say: "I demand my place in the sun."

Sir Thomas accepted these tributes with becoming phlegm, then casually observed that if they thought an English gentleman couldn't play the man when the dice were loaded against him they were labouring under a misapprehension. Graciously, he added that if his

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

two sons felt like walking to the races he would take charge of the camp, tidy up, and have the evening meal in readiness for their return.

"First," said he, "I must get into workmanlike clothes. Anything is good enough for the rough, open-air life we are likely to lead on this—this tour of England."

Reggie said, ecstatically: "Pater, you go right up there in my estimation. I'll rig you out."

And from his few belongings he brought a pair of khaki "shorts", a multi-coloured sweater, and a tweed cap. They might have been ideal garments for a young fellow on a "hike", but Sir Thomas was pretty old in the tooth, his beard was grey and his hair at the back of his head was somewhat long and had a tendency to curl upward, like the tail of a drake. Both Reggie and Harold vowed that the garments were eminently suited to the occasion; the beloved Virginia thought it was really noble of Sir Thomas to wear them, for he set a fine example to the others; Sadie was tactfully non-committal; Hogan walked into the solitude to observe to himself that not since he was soldiering in India had he seen anything so dam' funny, and then it was shot as a bird of prey.

Aunt Agatha and Phoebe were late in returning to breakfast, and Aunt Agatha was distressed to the point of collapse. It was the first time since girlhood that she had essayed a long walk. It came out that she had stopped to deliver an unwelcome lecture on birth control to a labourer's wife with a family of seven. Then she had inquired the way back to the main road. The woman avenged herself by sending the walkers three miles out of their way. The dust and the heat of a June morning had strained her patience, yet she was wonderfully good-tempered about it. As Sadie removed her shoes for her and set her blistered feet in warm water and boracic, Aunt Agatha remarked that in future the

DERBY DAY ADVENTURES

wife of a labourer could rear the nucleus of a fair-sized army and *she* wouldn't interfere. Then she saw Sir Thomas who, having finished breakfast, had been searching in the caravan locker for an axe with which to procure firewood. Her lower jaw dropped with the action of an automatic machine when it receives a coin ; her eyes became full and round.

"Heaven preserve us," she said. "Don't tell me that our awful predicament has turned his brain ?"

Reggie gave her a warning wink and she lapsed into silence. All the same, she kept a watchful eye on him until he disappeared in the direction of a plantation, then the others comforted her with the assurance that the little baronet and ex-Justice of the Peace had become a man among men.

The great adventure began for Sir Thomas about an hour after he left the camp. Away to the north the Epsom Downs heaved under their load of speculative humanity. About sixty thousand people had gathered there with the one object—seeing the race for the Blue Riband of the Turf and paying tribute to the nobleness of man's principal dumb friend, the horse. Approximately fifty-nine thousand would have a bet on the chance of their particular fancy winning, and their appreciation of the nobleness of the horse would depend on the result of the race. The English thoroughly enjoy the reputation of being the most sporting people in the world, and they would be the first to give a losing bookmaker credit for helping them to justify that reputation.

A tired critic once wrote of a play : "As this drama has been on the road for thirty years, little in the way of condemnation remains to be said of it." The same remark might apply to the Derby. The race is run over a distance of a mile and four furlongs, the track following three-quarters of an irregular oval. The three-year-old horses contesting the race parade in front of the grandstand in acknowledgment of the silk hats

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

that have been brought out of cold storage for the occasion. Because the Derby is a great democratic festival the silk hat is essential to Society as a mark of distinction that shall guide the foreign visitor. Some of these hats have seen as many as thirty Derbies, the nap being rubbed after the manner of the totem pole to record the exact number. They never look their best from the point of view of the democratic crowd outside the rings and 'stands unless it rains: generally it does rain, and as umbrellas are not allowed to be raised while a race is being run, the crowd gets a malevolent thrill from watching the deluge splash off the flat roof of these "tiles". As very few of the thousands see the race itself, from beginning to end, even the wearers of the silk hats don't begrudge the poor people this thrill.

The starting-post is somewhere in the next county and on the slope of a hill. For half an hour before the parade and ten minutes afterwards, the fifty thousand people packed along the rails and jammed together within the confines of the oval shout so loudly and wildly that peaceful Esquimaux in Iceland are unable to hear the flip of seals on the ice and a day's work is ruined. The cacophony stops so suddenly—with suspicious suddenness—that instinctively one feels one's pocket to make certain that the wallet is still there. The book-makers in the rings close their books with a snap and make for the refreshment rooms lest the unexpected spectacle of the favourite winning should prove too much for them.

The racing tipsters, clad in grotesque costumes, get off the 'course where they have been selling stable secrets at two shillings a whisper. The vast concourse pitches its voice in a hoarse dramatic key: "They're Off!" And the race begins. This profound declamation, addressed to nobody in particular, is a most vital part of Derby Day enjoyment. No man (or woman) who has attended the festival and refrained from joining in that

DERBY DAY ADVENTURES

chorus has any claim to true sportsmanship. Even the silk hats would feel it to be high treason if they didn't play a part in that dismal, breathless gasp.

From the grandstands it is possible to see a splash of colour which represents the jackets of the jockeys shooting quickly up the slope of the hill; then the picture fades out until the ridge of the Downs is reached, when the "field" reappears. It is not necessary to watch the horses in running, as everybody insists on "reading" the race aloud and shouting extravagant odds like "Hundred to One bar Knotty Knees". At the end of the straight ridge the horses turn to the left and dash down the slope to Tattenham Corner unseen by the multitude gathered near the winning-post opposite the 'stands. Then the straight run home. Cheers for the victor after you have learned which horse has won (because it's a million to one against your having seen it), and the great race is over until the following year. The correct thing then for the English lover of good horses is to go home and thenceforward to the end of his days date every happening from "the year Knotty Knees won the Derby. I saw him win it".

It is customary for the descriptive writers to turn in a prose poem to their newspaper. They tell of the azure skies and the hawk poised on the crest of the breeze high above the emerald green of undulating downs. They tell of the magic of balsamic scents gathered from gorse and clover by vagrant winds. They tell of the wide expanse of earth and sky, of the glory and majesty of a June day when a multitude of people find relaxation from the irksomeness of toil that is inseparable from everyday life. They tell of the indescribable grandeur of a noble, great-hearted horse full stretched to the gallop, foam-flecked, wide-eyed, and with nostrils dilated. It is all there—the beauty of it—but it is more self-satisfying to write about it in an office than to mix with the crowd for the sake of local colour.

When the racing is over, the mighty phalanx of

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

humanity presses close to begin the homeward trek. It is like a rabble army in retreat. Motor-cars and motor-coaches are wedged in the procession. Movement is slower than that of the centipede and, like the centipede, the column heaves and humps its way along. Raucous motor-hooters grunt and shriek, jostled pedestrians shout and threaten, inebriated "fares" sing and sway, and creeping in and out, like vermin over a carcase, are the sneak-thieves and pick-pockets who have come from the human middens and cesspools in every part of the country. Heaving and thrusting, sweating and fuming, hurling badinage and vulgar wit, the mass moves on through the twilight that has descended before the downs are left behind. London opens her suburban gates like a hydra-headed monster opening its jaws, and slowly, slowly, the mass passes into its maw.

The epitaph is cheerful and compensates for all. "It was the customary Derby crowd," say the newspapers on the following day. "Good-humoured and happy, and if the favourite had won it would have been even happier."

God bless the newspapers for that unfailing optimism and generosity of mind which keeps alive in the breast of every Englishman the spirit of true sportsmanship.

Sir Thomas Shadrow, on this day of days, was less interested than a goldfish in the Derby as a race. That most depressing of all diseases—Self-pity—had marked him down, and when he found himself alone on the other side of the Common he gave himself up to a thoroughly enjoyable attack of the malady. He had the whole wide world for an audience. In the distance lay the white dusty high-road along which an unending procession of motor-cars was wending its way to Epsom. He could not distinguish the occupants, but he knew what they were saying. They were mocking him in his misery. What did they care for the dignity of a baronetcy? They had no sense of patriotism. The

DERBY DAY ADVENTURES

fine old institutions of the country could fall into any old abyss and they wouldn't shed a tear nor heave a sigh. The grandeur of England was passing away; the spirit of Communism overshadowed all that was beautiful and historical. Soon it would become sheer lawlessness, might would be right, authority would be flouted, excesses indulged and, like Rome of old, the nation would crumble to dust. Whence came the poverty by which the people were said to be afflicted? Wasn't the damnable government responsible for it? Wasn't the government paying the people not to work by giving them the dole? And hadn't he said a thousand times that the government, or the Cabinet, was making a good thing out of it? How wicked the times when a gentleman of high social distinction should be cast on the mercy of the world and be compelled to *work* for his food. Think of all he had been in the past. Those moneyed upstarts in the procession yonder might pass him by without giving him a casual glance: what would they say if they took the trouble to turn back the files of the *County Herald* and read the splendours that had been associated with Highfield Court in his time and his father's before him. The Hunt breakfasts! The balls! The firework displays! The garden-parties! Work for his food? It was monstrous. He was a baronet, and entitled to the homage of the common people. True, he was left with only his dignity, but he would make them recognize that.

These ruminations stirred him to action. He shook a clenched hand at the heads of imaginary revolutionaries and challenged them to come on. He was an English gentleman and rather than yield a little of pride he would fight to the death.

These sentiments would have been excellent in a matinée idol or a hundred per cent. he-man on the films, but they gained nothing from the comical little figure arrayed in khaki "shorts", a multi-coloured sweater and a tweed cap that resembled a cowl on a

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

chimney pot. Furthermore, in his determination to show the camp that he was a man among men, he had started to hew down matured trees instead of applying his ridiculously small axe to brushwood. In his haste to get to work he had come away without a handkerchief and the dignity of a reigning monarch couldn't have prevented his using hands and sleeves to wipe the sweat from his face. The result was a mask curiously like that of a zebra, but, mercifully, there was no mirror to horrify him with his reflection.

Across the Common there came four gentlemen of the type known to racegoers as "the boys", or "the heads". Their ears were of the "cauliflower" brand—flat and thick and dead through much pounding in the prize-ring. Their noses spread across the face and were heavily dented in the bridge. True followers of the sport of kings, or king of sports, whichever it may be, they were on their way to the Derby to pick up any easy money that might be lying about.

One of them, with a sense of decency that was probably a sign of weakness in the eyes of his companions, stepped from the footpath to the screen of blackberry bushes and was about to obey the behests of Nature when he caught sight of Sir Thomas Shadrow. In the presence of the supernatural or the excessively grotesque, an ex-bruiser is as nervous as any of us. With a loud yell of "Hell!" this fellow sprang away from the bushes and shouted to his friends:

"Blimey! There's a bloody freak in there. A quid to nuffink he's got awye from a menagerie on the 'course."

There is courage in numbers: the four of them forced their way through the undergrowth and surrounded Sir Thomas. When momentary alarm had subsided they laughed coarsely and began to question him in a dialect that was more or less foreign to his ears.

"Goorstroof, cocky, what blinkin' aghtfit are you wiv? I ain't seen nuffink like you since Buffalo Bill was here."

DERBY DAY ADVENTURES

Sir Thomas was fortified by the recollection of the punch he had given Hogan that morning. He drew himself up stiffly.

"Go on your way, you vagabonds," he said, affecting a sternness he didn't feel. "Are you aware that you are addressing a Justice of the Peace?"

Nothing could have been more ineffective. If he had substantiated the fears of his discoverer and said that he was a freak—a human chameleon with the sting of a poisonous adder—they might have fled in horror. Instead, they roared with laughter.

"Old son, you're the 'nuts'," said the toughest of the quartette. "Give 'em that stuff on the 'course and we're quids in." He turned excitedly to his companions. "Git him dahn there," he said, "afore his bleedin' keeper comes back. He'll pull the craad. We give him the 'orse; he marks the cards and the stuff rolls in."

They intended to use him as a foil in their rascality as tipsters. The jargon they employed was almost wholly unintelligible to Sir Thomas, but even in the stress of the moment he recalled with malevolent satisfaction a letter he had written to *The Times* newspaper on the insidious debasement of the English language by the American film play. He had never been in a cinema, but here was irrefutable proof (if the editor should require it) that he knew what he was writing about.

He listened to them talking excitedly to each other and courageously calmed his own fears by assuming that they were harmless lunatics and might be humoured. Although he had never been a patron of horse-racing he had a vague notion of what was meant by 'course tipping. Exactly where he came into their deliberations he couldn't divine, and gradually it occurred to him that they believed him to be an owner of racehorses and in a position to guide them in their efforts to find the winner.

When two sane persons take each other for a lunatic

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

and fall back on humouring, it is amazing how perfectly they both resemble lunatics.

The toughest of the ruffians ended the conference abruptly.

"He's a blinkin' gold-mine," he said to the others. "Git him dahn there—that's all." He turned again to the little baronet. "You'd like to make a bit o' dough, old son—wouldn't yer?" He gesticulated and mutilated his speech as Englishmen will when trying to make their meaning plain to a foreigner or a lunatic. "Dough! Splosh! Doings! Get me? Plenty good, eh? Hell, you ain't arf funny. Funny! Your blinkin' dial."

"My name is Sir Thomas Shadrow."

"That's the stuff, old son. That'll fetch 'em. Tell 'em you're Lord Derby if you like and you has the stable goods in your pocket. See? We does the barkin' for yer an' keep the other 'boys' off. Up come the mugs and you mark their card at a bob a nob." He stepped back to appraise the "shorts" and laughed immoderately. "Could you do a bit of a shuffle?" he asked. "Just a couple of steps. Like me—see!" He lifted his legs like a kilted Highlander walking through a thistle bed and whistled a couple of bars of a tune.

"Gentlemen," said Sir Thomas, conscious of a little nervousness by this time, "I must give you good day, and get back to my friends."

"Like hell you must," said the tough. "You're comin' with us."

They seized him with villainous disrespect. He didn't struggle for he realized the futility of doing so. Better to dissemble and await the moment when a police officer or a friendly passer-by should come to his rescue.

They hurried him along and told him that he would most certainly "make a bit for himself" if he did as they instructed him. They added casually that if he tried to break away or attract the wrong sort of attention they would strangle him with the loose ends of his beard. What intrigued him most, however, was the whispered

DERBY DAY ADVENTURES

warning of the mildest-looking ruffian that "if he wasn't a good boy they'd take him back to the 'nut-house' from which he had escaped."

They walked fast—much too fast for the little figure in khaki "shorts" and multi-coloured sweater. Soon they were among the people on the outskirts of the racecourse. Now, he thought, the annoying adventure would end. He was beginning to visualize the fear that would prostrate these rascals when they learned that they had molested a real baronet.

The sudden appearance of two police officers right in the path along which they were hurrying almost brought a laugh to Sir Thomas's lips. He would need only to say two words to them. Why, in the county town where he had browsed all his life, members of the police force were accustomed to salute when they were speaking to him on the telephone.

The pressure on his arms tightened as boldly his captors approached the police. The principal tough began to shout in a raucous voice:

"He's gotta 'orse! He's gotta 'orse! It's money for jam. 'Elp yerselves!"

Sir Thomas believed this to be a deliberate attempt to drown any appeal he might make for police protection; whereupon he called out indignantly:

"I have nothing of the sort. I don't own a horse." He tried to shout and raise a hand above his head to summon the police, but a fist like a cannon-ball struck him in the small of the back and one of the captors said in his ear:

"Shut up, you little rat! Open yer 'trap' again and I'll hit a hole through yer."

Tough number one renewed the proclamation:

"He's gotta 'orse! What did we give yer at Gatwick? Four winners aght of five. 'Cos why? 'Cos we pays for information."

They were near the police officers now and making for the racecourse.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Officer," shouted Sir Thomas frenziedly.

"He means 'Clarence'," shouted the leading tough and laughed in the face of the police officers, who were smiling with the crowd at the spectacle of what they believed to be a grotesquely-clad tipster.

On any race day and particularly on Derby Day, scores of blackguards, who probably have never seen the inside of a racing-stable, array themselves in motley or jockey's riding clothes, dash on the 'course between races, and offer to name the winner of the next event in return for a few shillings. There are professional tipsters who really have information to sell, but the majority have little more than brazen effrontery to commend them. If by a fluke they should "spot a winner", their voices bellow like thunder with: "*Did* I give you that one? *Do* I know anything?" And the fool public willingly pays an increased charge for the next piece of information. Even when these prophets give the name of a horse that finished last, they will return to the scene of action with the battle-cry: "Didn't I give you the last winner?" It is not always tactful to reply in the interests of truth, that he gave you a stumor.

There is fierce rivalry among these followers of the turf. In order to attract a crowd so that they may pitch the tale it is a good notion to provide a drôle as in the case of Sir Thomas Shadrow, former Justice of the Peace. And in all truth there was really nothing funnier on Epsom Downs that day. Apart from the comic clothes he wore, his face was the most extraordinary picture conceivable. The long and harrowing walk under a broiling sun had caused the perspiration to ooze from every pore. The grime of the brushwood near the camp had been spread by the sweat; he had wiped his face with the sleeve of the sweater and . . . well, he would have remained unrecognized in The House With the Golden Windows.

Down the 'course the tipsters hurried him and came to a halt not far from the grandstands. They ranged

DERBY DAY ADVENTURES

themselves around him and began again to shout: "We've gotta 'orse!" He was now too exhausted to protest or make any attempt to escape. His mind had become hazed—he saw the human masses in front of him as though he were looking from the inside of a glass water tank. It was when the police officers failed to see more than the grotesque in him that courage faded. Long afterwards he reflected that there might be circumstances in which a murderer could carry the dead body of his victim through a crowd and leave only the impression that he was clowning.

During the whole of this terrible time, the thoughts of Sir Thomas seldom turned to the camp and what construction they might place on his absence. The one consuming fear was that some member of the Society he had known would recognize him. Fear of physical hurt may be insignificant compared with the fear of scorn or contempt.

The tipsters worked like Trojans and luck took a fancy to them that day. One of them picked up a tip from an acquaintance in the same profession and he instructed the victim to "mark the card" of any patron. He gave him a stub of lead pencil and said, "Number Seven, old son. We'll take the dough."

Patrons were amazingly numerous; the fee was two shillings; the "old son" carried out his job with the mien of a sleep-walker.

Then the mounted police swept down the 'course to clear it for the race. Sir Thomas was dragged under the rails among the people and lay down at their feet, crushed in spirit, exhausted to the point of fainting.

The race was run: the horses passed within a yard of where he was lying. He didn't see them. He heard a roar like that of the seas breaking themselves in frenzy on the rocks.

He was yanked to his feet by the tipsters who were beside themselves with joy. They had tipped a winner at seven to one against. Now they had something

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

to shout about ! They hauled him along with them to the old pitch. From sheer weakness he dropped to his knees and closed his eyes. They bellowed like bulls. They jumped and cavorted. They extolled the wisdom of those who had patronized them and damned the folly of those who hadn't. Their lofty "Don't blame us if you backed a 'dead' 'un," was the perfection of disdain.

The mildest of the scoundrels drew the attention of the others to the plight of the foil.

"Git him a drink," said the leader, and resumed his haranguing of the crowd . . . "Did we give yer th' rotten fav'rite for the larst race ? Did we let yer dahn ? Did we give yer a seven-to-one ? Very well, then ! It's infermaytion yer want, and we got it. But we has to pye for it and it ain't fair to expeck us to give it yer for nix."

"He says he carn't get up," said the mild one who was kneeling over the victim.

The leader broke off his address to the crowd to tender the sympathetic advice that "a kick in the guts" was the best medicine he could think of at the moment. He picked up the thread of his discourse :

"A seven-to-one winner ! That's what we give yer ! But what we got for the next race is somethin' to pay for yer keep right through the season."

"He carn't talk," said the other tough on the ground.

"Git him a drink. Orl he wants is a bottle o' beer."

The fellow whose solicitude was so touching got to his feet, scrambled through the crowd and reached a booth on the course. He shouted for a bottle of beer : there were no clean glasses obtainable as business was brisk. He didn't wait for one to be cleaned ; he raced back with the bottle and pushed the neck of it between the lips of Sir Thomas.

Sir Thomas drank ! He was parched. He drank deeply and he drank again after the others had taken turns in having a swig. It revived him ; he was helped to his feet and the game went on. There was no tip

DERBY DAY ADVENTURES

coming from the "cauliflower ear" fraternity this time, but the four prophets believed they had found a mascot, a talisman, in the "freak". They had only one fear regarding him and it was not that the police might interfere. Their fixed impression by this time was that he had wandered from a home or an asylum: there were several of these institutions in the neighbourhood. It was not unlikely that a search would be made for him. They must make hay while the sun was shining.

They placed a pencil between his nerveless fingers, held a race-card before him, and commanded him to shut his eyes and stab at random!

And the gods of chance who were enjoying themselves that day, decreed that he should mark the name of a horse that won at the odds of ten to one against!

Amazing! Stupendous! The fame of the tipsters leaped along the 'course like a tongue of fire across a sun-dried common!

So it went on. Five winners, including the Derby itself, were picked out by that magic pencil held in the fingers of a real live baronet, clad in shorts and a comic sweater. The harvest was great by the time the racing was over for the day.

The hearts of the thugs were softened towards all mankind. They led the little man away from the dense crowds now leaving the Downs and halted him in the shelter of a clump of gorse. He had long since lost the faculty of speech; his actions were mechanical.

"Gorstroof, I don't like yer to get awye," said the leader. "I'd spring a quid a week jest to tyke yer abaght wiv me."

There was a whispered consultation and prudence argued that they should take him back to the place where they found him earlier in the day. There, the leader addressed him in a kindly paternal manner:

"Look 'ere, old son! Here's a quid for yerself—in two halves. Yer've earned it. Put it in some place where yer blinkin' keeper carn't find it. Nah, you'd

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

like to pick up a bit more—wouldn't yer? Good enough! You meet us 'ere to-morrow mornin' and we'll see yer okay at the end of the day."

They left him staring after them. One of them, looking back, must have been taken with the fancy that he needed a little cheering, for he curled his right arm and scratched his ribs with a Simian-like action, also he rendered a fairly good imitation of a monkey squealing.

Dusk was creeping on. The camp, being to the south of the racecourse, lay in soothing calm; the vast hordes of sportsmen were heaving northward. Dirty, exhausted, and indifferent to all the dignity that might be associated with the title of a baronet, Sir Thomas Shadrow gazed at the two ten-shilling Treasury notes that had been thrust upon him. A latent sense of humour stirred among the ashes of his fallen pride.

Those two notes represented payment for work done! It was the first time in his life thus far that he had earned wages!

He wasn't conscious of any foolish elation; on the contrary, he resolved to make his way back to the camp and say nothing about his adventures.

Lady Shadrow and Aunt Agatha were reading; Sadie and Phoebe were preparing the evening meal. When they saw the crumpled little figure emerging from the gorse they raised a welcoming cheer. He was brought into the circle and given a deck chair. They assumed that he had been wood-cutting; they extolled his he-man courage in teaching them all the grandeur of labour. Lady Shadrow, gentle as the twilight itself, and as soft of voice as the breeze that brushed the gorse, knelt beside his chair and whispered: "So proud I am of you, darling!" Sadie carried hot water to his tent and Phoebe damned the defection of Hogan who had migrated early in the afternoon.

Sir Thomas bathed in the seclusion of his bell tent and was tolerant of the collapsible bath when it collapsed. There was grit on the soap, but it was luxury after what

DERBY DAY ADVENTURES

he had suffered. A draught came under the bottom of the tent and shivered his spine—for him it was laden with incense. When he reached for his customary trousers a field mouse scuttled out of a leg—it was the prettiest thing he had seen for years. By the time he was dressed and ready to go out of the tent, he nearly broke into song. He was determined that nothing and nobody should wring from him the story of his exploits on that Derby Day. They must be forgotten.

Reggie and Harold returned just as the potato stew was being served out. Hogan trailed in later.

“‘Shoot’, Columbus,” said Sadie to Reggie. “Where have you been all day?”

“Racing,” said Reggie without a blush.

“Gambling?” said Aunt Agatha in a horrified tone of voice. “Reggie, you don’t mean to say that you’ve sunk so low as that?”

“Really,” said Harold, yawning, “I was to blame . . . Sorry, pater, if we shock you.”

Reggie took from his pocket a handful of Treasury notes. Everybody, save Sir Thomas, gasped in astonishment—he lowered his brows and stared inquiringly.

“Twenty-two pounds,” said Reggie proudly. “That’s the nucleus of the new Shadrow fortune.”

“Won by gambling,” groaned Aunt Agatha.

“It was money for jam,” drawled Harold. “At least, that’s how the low-browed person put it to me.”

“‘Shoot’!” said Sadie again and with growing impatience. “Doggone, I’m all het up!”

Harold stretched out his long legs and salted his stew.

“You tell them, old man,” he said to Reggie.

“We didn’t mean to bet,” said Reggie, “for we had less than a pound between us when we got to the ‘course. But I spoke to a fellow in the crowd and he said he’d made eight pounds something on a tip he bought for a couple of shillings. He’d dash on the ‘course between races and come back with the ‘goods’. Not a bad sort of fellow. He gave us the tip. He said there was a blue-

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

nosed old baboon picking out the winners with a pencil his keepers had put in his paw. We didn't take the trouble to go to the spot—we were too busy getting on our bets with the bookmaker and standing by to see that he didn't 'welsh'."

"Twenty-two pounds," said Sadie ecstatically, as she finished counting the notes. "Some baboon! Will he be there to-morrow?"

There was a heavy silence. The promise of easy money can play havoc with prejudices.

Sir Thomas cleared his throat.

"Whether he is there to-morrow or not," he said, with great deliberation, "I trust that we shall not demean ourselves by turning to gambling in the hour of our misfortunes."

"Thank you, my dear," said the gentle Virginia. "Your courage is a stimulus to all of us."

Sir Thomas stooped to fling a brand back on the camp fire.

"I suggest that we move on to-night," he said.

"What you say, pater, goes with me," said Reggie. He was rather proud of his father in that moment.

CHAPTER X

SADIE, "BOLONEY", AND SOME HOME TRUTHS

THEY had limbered up and were ready to move off to the westward: Reggie fancied that if they made for Devon, they might fall in with a number of fairs and possibly pick up a few wrinkles on the art of augmenting one's income.

For as long as Reggie could remember, his father had talked of going into the Wessex country, but he had got no further than talking. Englishmen—especially those who belong to the "classes"—are averse from touring their own country. It may possess all the splendours of the Continental resorts but it is not nearly so impressive to write to a friend from (say) Torquay as from Biarritz, or Venice or Florence. If an English tourist cannot excite envy in the breast of someone he has left at home, he feels that he has been cheated out of the true delights of a holiday.

Sadie's agitation was patent to no one save Reggie as the time for departing drew near. Again and again she walked to the high road. He asked no question. Five minutes before they were ready to strike camp, a motor-car stopped within easy distance of them. Sadie happened to be near the spot. She returned with a young man who carried a camera and the usual paraphernalia of a Press photographer. She informed the camp that the young man was interested in the romance of the English countryside and would be mightily grateful if they would allow him to "shoot" a few scenes of the camp.

There's only one thing that gives greater affront to English county dignity than being asked to pose for a photograph, and that is being left out of one. Sir Thomas graciously posed himself with the others, near the steps

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

of the caravan ; the flashlight half-blinded him, but he was unperturbed. He said to Sadie in an undertone :

"I suppose he thinks we're gipsies. I would like to see his face if he should learn the truth."

The trek westward began, the family taking up their old positions. It was a glorious night, warm, though not uncomfortably so. They took the by-roads and escaped the streams of traffic that pour in and out of London on Derby night.

Reggie was tireless, and if Sadie, by his side, did drop into a doze now and again, it was only for five-minute spells. Perhaps it was the acquisition of that twenty-two pounds that kept Reggie awake. It had seemed so ridiculously easy to make the money. He wondered, he said to her, if they could make it a sort of gambling fund and move from racecourse to racecourse. Sadie asked him if he had left all his brains in the United States.

"Betting on horse-racing," she said, "was devised for fools and rogues. It's worse when you win than when you lose, because when you win you can't sleep for thinking of the horse that's going to help you lose what you've won."

They rumbled on till long after dawn and came to a halt in a field on the outskirts of Windsor. Those within the caravan were still asleep and Sadie and Reggie and Hogan pitched camp without assistance. It was a morning on which depression could have found no encouragement. In the near distance, the majestic pile of Windsor Castle still wore a thin purple mantle of river mist ; eastward and westward the Thames flowed like a gold and silver serpent winding its way through the greenery of woodland. The old freestone and brick of Eton College held the tinge of orange absorbed from the morning sun. The Royal borough yawned as it turned over in its second sleep.

Sadie said she would walk into the town before breakfast. She said she might never again get a chance to see those playing-fields on which the battle of Waterloo

SADIE, "BOLONEY" . . .

had been won. She returned before the others were dressed, and with a glint of triumph in her eye she drew Reggie aside.

"Boy," she said, "I want you to get that betting idea right out of your think pan. There's plenty of corn in Egypt if you set out with the right make of reaping hook. Look at that and tell me I'm goofy."

She showed him a copy of a morning pictorial newspaper. There, in the centre of a page, was a reproduction of the photograph taken of the camp the previous night. Two or three smaller photographs showed the caravan party leaving Highfield Court on the fateful morning when they began the great adventure.

"I took those snaps," said Sadie at his side.

Reggie made no comment.

"See news story, page sixteen!" He turned over the pages. His eyes became larger and rounder. The headlines would have stopped a spinster talking at a christening, they were so arresting. "Impoverished Baronet Takes to the Road—Courage Will Save Old England Yet—The Hill of Prosperity Is Never Too High For the Man Who Believes in Himself!" A full story of the life and aims of the little baronet followed.

Reggie spoke in a hollow voice.

"Sadie, you did this?"

"I'll tell the world."

"He'll die of shame."

"Poverty is not a disgrace, Reggie, if you're ready to work your way out of it."

"His friends will see this and sneer."

"What would they have done if he had tried to borrow from them?"

"You don't understand English pride, Sadie."

"When I saw him set off to cut firewood yesterday I saw pride in a finer sense than ever I'd seen it before."

"You wrote all of this?"

"Sure. It was quick work and cunning. When we stopped at Reigate on the road to Banstead Downs,

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

I mailed what I'd written along with the roll of films. And I telephoned the news-editor from a road house—a pub—while you were at the races backing the tips of that blue-nosed baboon you told us about. I asked him to send that Press camera along."

"You moved quickly, Sadie."

"It's a habit we have in the States, big boy. Do you think it will hurt his feelings, Reggie?"

"Undoubtedly, Sadie. We'll see that he doesn't get hold of a copy of this paper."

"Have I hurt your feelings, honey?"

There was a fearful pause: it started a suspicious sparkle in the eyes of the little woman.

"How much is the news-editor giving you for this—this treason?"

"I've got it," said Sadie and there was a break in her voice, for his suspicion was very solemn. "That camera man brought it with him."

"How much?"—peremptorily.

"Twenty guineas, Reggie!"

"Twenty—*what*? Sadie! Sadie! It's a lie—a lie!"

"What's a lie, honey? Don't look at me like that. What's a lie?"

"That America has taken *all* our money! Hell, Sadie, let's buy a typewriter. I can tell that news-editor some home truths about the pater. They'll sell his rag faster than he can print. Twenty guineas? Oh, ghee, baby, I'm sitting so high on the top of the world I just can't see a speck of trouble on the ground. You—you! Lord! Wouldn't Northcliffe have wept with joy over you!"

They remained in this camp for three or four days, more out of a desire to please Sadie than anyone else. For her, the famous old college—"The King's College of Our Lady of Eton beside Windsor"—had even greater appeal than the Royal Castle.

Sir Thomas was immensely pleased by this trait in

SADIE, "BOLONEY" . . .

her character that compelled homage to a seat of learning.

"Founded by Henry VI in 1440," he observed, with a beautiful casualness that suggested that he himself laid one of the first bricks, but had almost forgotten the magnificence of the whole business. "The principal annual celebration is held on the fourth of June, my dear, the birthday of King George the Third. His Majesty was rather fond of the school. We must take you to the annual cricket match between Eton and Harrow. I've never been to one myself, but I think you ought to go. I had no idea that you were interested in our Colleges. I suppose you have nothing like them in America. Personally, I was at Marlborough."

"I'm interested in your colleges all right," said Sadie, affecting awe. "Why, you've only got to mention Eton or Cambridge or Oxford at a party back home and they go 'bugs'."

"Pardon," said Sir Thomas.

"Why, crazy, to know the title of the book."

"What book, my dear?"

"The latest 'dirt' book."

"Dirt?"

"Sure. Don't all collegiates write 'dirt' books? Out Hollywood, they've got a standing offer for all your English college novels. They've got to be trimmed a trifle for the screen, but we manage to get 'em past the censor. Reggie didn't go to any of 'em, did he?"

Sir Thomas wasn't quite sure of himself; there was a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

"Reginald was going up to Cambridge when war broke out," he said austere.

"Yeah," said Sadie, dreamily and maliciously, "Reggie's much too 'clean'-minded to have been at any college. There's nothing of the snob about the lad—is there?" And, before he could get his breath: "I don't say Henry the Sixth and the founders of the other colleges didn't start with good intentions, but it seems to me they couldn't hold the show once they got it

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

started. Now, that countryman of yours, Doctor Barnardo, he knew just how to make a man of a kid instead of wasting his time making him a gentleman."

"Sadie!"

"Who started this rough house?"

"God forgive you! I was trying to enlighten you about the foundations of one of our greatest seats of learning."

"No, you were not," said Sadie. "Your mouth was saying that sort of boloney, but in your heart you were saying: 'England stands for all that is noble and good. She leads the world intellectually. When God made an Englishman he paused in his labours and allowed a subordinate to finish the rest of the world including America.'"

"Let us say no more about the subject, Sadie; I regret, more than I can say, that I should have provoked you into this—this mordacious mood."

"That doesn't go with me, Sir Thomas," said Sadie. and she would have given her pet lipstick if Reggie had been within earshot. "When I start into a fight I like to go through with it to the clang of the gong. If we don't fight this to a finish now we shall be sparring all the rest of the year. I had to train Reggie out in the States, and I might as well rub the corners off you."

"My child! Do you realize that you are talking to one whose name may be traced right through history, as far back as William the Conqueror?"

She was enjoying this. Her little head was cocked on one side; there was the light of devilry in her eyes. His head was flung back on his shoulders, his beard jutted out defiantly. He was saying to himself—it was so plain to her—that this incorrigible might conceivably marry into his family and bear his name. He couldn't think of any greater blot on the escutcheon.

"William!" she echoed. She dropped easily into exaggerated slang because she knew that he loathed it. "Say, how many folk did that same old Bill bring across

SADIE, "BOLONEY" . . .

to this li'le ol' country in his boat? Doggone, we got a million of 'em in the States, and there must have been another million that made the trip in the *Mayflower*."

He drew in a cloud of air through his nostrils.

"Young woman," he said, sternly, "when you have been in this country a little longer you will appreciate that English tradition is the inspiration that carries an Englishman onward to victory."

"Like hell it is," said Sadie. "It's a leaning-post to most of 'em, so far as I can see. It's an excuse for dodging an honest job of work."

"You don't know the English, woman! They are not afraid of work."

"They'd rather borrow if they can do it quietly," said Sadie.

"May heaven pity you! Do you realize that you are a visitor to these shores—that you are—are——"

"Tolerated?"

"Privileged."

"Well, there are thousands of the English sheltering over yonder—just across the Atlantic."

"Spreading the prestige of the British."

"Boloney! Picking up easy dough in Hollywood, or scratching their backs against the theatre walls on Broadway."

"My—my son Reginald is an Englishman."

"That's your fault, not his."

"And he's proud of the fact that he is an Englishman."

"He was so proud of it when I met him for the first time that he would have swapped a coronet for a meat pie."

"You have dazed me with this awful outburst. I had no idea that behind your smiling face there was anything like this ghastly—er—Bolshevism. That's what it is—Bolshevism, anarchy!"

"What's the meaning of Bolshevism?"

"Do you question my intelligence?"

"No, I am asking for the low-down."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"You horrify me."

"The truth generally horrifies anybody who's browsing on tradition and slop and sentiment."

"To think that I should have lived to see this evil day."

"The day's all right, *Pop*!"

"Pop!"

"What's wrong with that?"

"I insist that while you are in my presence you shall give me my rank."

"Okay with me," said Sadie. "And if you can take pride in hearing Hogan say: 'Baronet, take that spade and dig a cesspool for the camp,' I'll be the first to say there's something fine in your traditions."

He wavered slightly. She fancied that there was a suspicious movement in his throat.

"I know that I've come down in the world, *Sadie*," he said, with peculiar weakness, "but I didn't think that you would be one of the first to jeer at me because I have to—to work for my livelihood."

And then, of course, the real Sadie put the motley of the jester aside. The laughter came back into her eyes; and all the tenderness of which she was capable throbbed in her voice and attitude.

"I was only fooling you, Sir Thomas," she said. "Maybe, before we get to the end of this long journey we shall all have to take a mighty lot of rough with the smooth; it's just as well to get used to the knocks and toughen our skins. I do admire the English in many respects, but I confess that when they are 'ritzy' and stand on their hind legs to talk about tradition and dignity, they make me sort of raw. What's there wrong in work? Even for a baronet whose ancestors came out of the garden of Eden or sat on King John's knee. Why yell 'Bolshevist' when somebody talks about the dignity of labour? One of these days there will be no 'Successes' in the form of men who inherit title and riches without rendering some service to the world. Men will have to

SADIE, "BOLONEY" . . .

prove their worth by what they do with their hands and their brains. And a man will invest his job with dignity—not loathing. Oh, we're going to learn a lot about life on this trip."

Sir Thomas had been taken aback by her change of front. As he listened, his lips twitched, and a smile drove all the false pride out of his eyes. He held out a hand.

"I'll tell the world," he said.

CHAPTER XI

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

THE House With the Golden Windows rolled along for a month through the country lanes, along the high-roads and across the commons of Southern England. When only a few persons are congregated together for any length of time, the spirit of acrimony generally forces itself uppermost, all niceties, courtesies and friendliness being ruthlessly subordinated. Man may be a gregarious animal, but he loves to live within himself. If he is compelled by circumstances to make a confidant of a companion, he comes to hate that companion for knowing so much about him. No matter what our upbringing or our station in life, we all of us have little secret sins, or foibles, or tendencies that cannot be concealed in a small party. Secret strength is mostly fictitious ; secret weaknesses are too common. A locked bathroom is a source of conjecturing to ninety-nine persons out of a hundred, although they'd hate to confess it.

Nothing like acrimony disturbed the harmony of the Shadrow party during the first month, however. There were altercations, short-lived arguments and snappy moments, but these lent only zest to the adventure as a whole : they were a certain safeguard against ennui, lassitude, and, most important of all, self-pity.

With amazing facility, they shaped themselves to their changed conditions of life. The unfailing optimism of Sadie and Reggie was meat and drink to the others. There were occasions—as when the caravan sank to the axles in a rain-soaked field and they had to dig it out the while the heavens poured—when tempers became edged.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

A sense of humour lifted them back from the precipice and restored equanimity.

From Windsor, they headed westward into the downlands of Wiltshire—a county that seems always to hold itself aloof from the rest of the country. The average Wiltshireman does not readily believe that there are peopled lands outside his own boundaries, and if there are, he refuses stubbornly to believe that such people have the attributes of himself.

It is essentially an agricultural county although the town of Swindon depends for its existence chiefly on the vast railway works there. The farming community is in nowise impressed by this centre of industry; indeed it speaks of it in a regretful tone. They will say of a man that he is “in the Works” and imply by an inflection of the voice that they would rather not discuss him further. That “in the Works” is a very comprehensive term. You cannot gather from it whether a man is a locomotive superintendent or a labourer, and natural tact forbids that you should pursue inquiries.

In the agricultural towns of the county, there is an atmosphere, to-day, that belongs to the Early Victorian period. Some of the lawyers still use quill pens, although it is not improbable that they can calculate a bill of costs with all the dispatch one might associate with the use of a typewriter. The lawyer in these small towns is a most imposing personality and can still keep the wonder growing that his one small head should hold all the things he knows.

The gentleman of leisure, or pleasure farmer, is secluded from his fellows by high walls and screens of elms. His private life is wholly unknown to everyone in the community save the lawyer. He is very jealous of his secrecy, very fearful lest it should be betrayed. Once a week—on market day—he rides out on his grey horse, ostensibly to let the people know that he is still alive and to give a condescending nod to the tenant farmers.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Don't be taken in by any such ingenious subterfuge. He never fails to slow his horse to a walking pace while passing the offices of the family lawyer. From the saddle it is possible for him to see over the dark wire screen that reaches half-way up the window. The tiers of black tin deed boxes are against the wall facing the window. He marks his own magical name painted in white letters, gravely nods to it, and is so relieved to find that the box hasn't been stolen that he urges his horse into a canter and goes back to his retreat, probably to reproach his wife for her extravagance or to write an inane letter to the editor of the local weekly on the duty of all true Britons to stem the rising tide of socialism. He has less sense of humour than the stone lions that stand on his gate-posts, but once a year, when he honours the local tradesmen with his presence at their annual dinner, he cracks the same old joke his ancestors cracked and the local reporter, who knows his job, tells the readers of his newspaper that the company was "convulsed with laughter".

Some of these fine old English gentlemen lead a perfectly honest and useless life. Some get into song and fable. Some get into Parliament where they are distinguished by what Sydney Smith called their "brilliant flashes of silence". Some die respected by their fellows, are buried with considerable ceremonial, and decently forgotten.

The caravan passed through some of the most picturesque villages in England, for they lie here, in Wiltshire. The thatched roofs of cottages humped against the slopes of the magical downs appealed to all that was romantic in Sadie: she never went for a walk without returning heavily-weighted with folk-lore. The racing stables and gallops around Foxhill fascinated her, but for some reason best known to himself, Sir Thomas refused to be interested in her inquiries about this aspect of life. Hogan, being better acquainted than the others with the history of racing, found in her an avid listener.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

How did they manage to live during these weeks? "No man need starve in England," Reggie had said, "if he has the health and strength to work." Haymaking could never find more labour than it required. All of them save Lady Shadrow offered their services along the route and earned both wages and food. Moreover, they were never refused a corner of a field or copse in which to pitch their camp. They were asked no questions about their identity, and although their clothes lacked cut and style, the wearers were never associated with gipsies.

"There's no need to tell me who you are," said one old farmer. "You might be lords and ladies for anything I know or care. Dang me, the country be full of people who haven't a bean, but can you wonder at that when Amerricay has nearly all our money and the government gives the rest to young fellows to keep 'em from working?"

A wonderful change had come over the Shadrow party during this month. The character of the little baronet would have been the more intriguing to a psychologist. All trace of arrogance was gone, but not at the bidding of courage. Resignation should never be confounded with courage. He appeared to accept the situation as a decree of fate against which there was no appeal. Once he had eliminated from his mind the fear of what old acquaintances might think of him should they learn the truth, he gave himself up with boyish enthusiasm to the minor adventures inseparable from caravan life. He didn't complain when an irksome menial task was imposed; and he would walk a mile for a bucketful of drinking water as cheerfully as he would have walked a hundred yards to give evidence against a poacher in the old days of prosperity.

The others were too preoccupied with their own joys and troubles to give much attention to him, but the solicitude of Lady Shadrow was inexpressibly beautiful. She had gained strength in a degree that would have disheartened medical men who have to live on their fees,

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

but no one dreamed of allocating any task to her. When they were in the hayfield she rested beneath the awning it was their custom to stretch from the roof of the caravan. When they returned she had ready for Sir Thomas a place by her side. As twilight deepened, the others moved away to tasks or whatever local attraction offered, leaving the two sitting near each other, hand clasping hand after the manner of children. Once, after a hard day of raking in the hayfield, he was looking ruefully at his blistered hands when the semblance of a sob from her caused him to glance up quickly. No words were spoken, but with a simple movement that was as beautiful as it was simple, she raised his hand to her lips. Neither years nor poverty can rob real love of its ineffable sweetness.

Aunt Agatha, once the unwieldy and petulant, had been the admiration of even Hogan. Her metamorphosis really began on the night a thunderstorm broke over the camp and almost swept caravan and tents away. Alarm on account of the delicate Virginia made a stalwart of Aunt Agatha that night. She performed prodigious feats of strength and energy, digging with spade to make a channel that should divert the rush of water, lashing the wheels of the caravan to nearby saplings, clinging to tarpaulin that bellied with the wind, and running to and fro at the behests of the men who worked frantically to defeat the storm.

It is a curious fact that profanity is accepted by civilization as one of the principal supports of courage. In time of war, soldiers are given all the licence they require in this respect when called on to attack.

Long after the storm had subsided, Reginald observed that the unconscious lapsing into impolite English had made a new and a better woman of Aunt Agatha—she who had passed fifty years in the cloistered seclusion of a country house, where an expletive would have shattered the very windows. When the deluge was at its fiercest and the wind had reached its greatest velocity,

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

she splashed from point to point and man to man, conveying instructions or carrying implements. She had long since taken to breeches and gaiters, and in these she plodded and squelched the while she shouted above the roar of the elements :

"Reggie, the hammer ! Hogan says give him the bloody hammer, quick !

"Harold ! Yank a post out of that fence and prop the caravan. Reggie says where the hell did you put the bloody tow-rope ?"

It was an unforgettable night, but when calm came—and for long afterwards—the memory of Aunt Agatha and her lingual lapses stirred as brightly as a star in the night in the mind of all of them.

Harold, the æsthete, had not escaped at least a little transformation. The fact that the family was impoverished had percolated only slowly through his unemotional mind, and whatever the pain of disillusionment, he had become inured to it even as it percolated. Aunt Agatha's protest that he seemed to be indifferent to the "disgrace" that had fallen on the Shadrows was adequately met with his tired, "Well ! Why worry if there's no alternative ?"

"You don't appear to realize that you have fallen from a high pedestal," she said. He was sitting on the bottom step of the caravan at the time, a bucket between his long legs and a half-peeled potato in his hand. He looked at the potato and blinked before answering her.

"Don't you think it an awful waste to peel these things ?" he asked. "We might give them a bit of a wash and boil them in their jackets."

"I said 'from a high pedestal'."

"Yes, I heard you, but were you frightfully happy up there ?"

"We had our dignity, Harold."

"We've got it now, so far as I can make out, and if we haven't, we have comfort."

"Comfort ?" She breathed deeply. "Do you

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

appreciate the fact that I haven't lain in a decent bed for over a month?"

"But you've *slept* in the substitute, Aunt Agatha."

"Do you realize that all sense of propriety has been stamped out of me?"

"I hadn't noticed it, aunt."

"Then you ought to have noticed it. Am I so old and—and——"

"Ill-favoured?"

"Yes, ill-favoured that I am above notice?"

"Really, I haven't looked at it in that way."

"Look at these"—indicating the mud-stained breeches she was wearing and the big, clumsy field boots that Reggie had picked up cheaply in Windsor. "Do they conform to your ideas of what a lady should wear?"

"Are they uncomfortable, Aunt Agatha?"

"Of course not, or I shouldn't have them on."

"Then why disturb your mind about them?"

"What would—what would Lady Fratton, for instance, say if she saw me in this get-up? What would Society say? What would Lord Pandick, your artistic friend, say?"

"Would he take those breeches off, Aunt Agatha, and give you something better?"

"Take *my breeches* off! Harold, you forget yourself!"

"Calm yourself, my dear," he said and turned over the potato he was peeling. "I suppose I ought to have washed my hands before I started this job," he said wearily, "but I thought that with all this water in the bucket I would be washing them as I went along."

She changed the subject, realizing that he wasn't helping her in that direction. She tried him on another tack.

"Have you noticed anything about your father lately, Harold?" she asked, lowering her voice to a whisper.

"He's getting jolly sporting," said Harold, appreciatively. "He wanted me to go poaching last night. What do you think of that?"

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

"You didn't encourage him?"

"No, frankly I didn't. His ideas on trapping game are dreadfully crude; nearly boyish, in fact."

"Exactly!" said Aunt Agatha, melodramatically. "He's going back to his childhood, Harold. That's the great fear that keeps me on tenterhooks. This awful trouble has affected his brain."

Harold dropped a potato in the bucket of water and wiped the resultant splash from his eyes with the back of his grimy hand.

"He never had a frightful pile of brains—had he, Aunt Agatha?"

"He's your father, Harold."

"Yes . . . My dear, must you scratch your knee in that manner? It rather irritates me."

"And there's more than one brain affected," she said, with acerbity. "Scratch? Do you never scratch? Is your mind so full of knowledge that it hasn't room to consider the possibility of fleas gloating over the plight of this party?"

"If you look in the locker, Aunt, you will find a large tin of boracic powder. I thought of that when we were at Epsom. Boracic has several excellent qualities when you're living this sort of life. If I were you, my dear, I'd shove some into old Wung: that's the fellow who holds what I would call flea receptions, and the dam' things overstay their welcome. Where's Reggie this morning?"

"I neither know nor care. Have you noticed anything about Phoebe?"

"Trifle morose, maybe, but that will wear off."

"She's brooding," said Aunt Agatha, decisively. "It's all very well for you men to pretend that you enjoy this life, but I can see into her mind. She is young. She had just reached that age when a girl is entitled to look about her and choose her future——"

"Well—well, why didn't she?"

"Because her father lost all his money."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"What the deuce had that to do with it?"

"Who was going to marry a penniless girl?"

"Who had the nerve to suggest that he was only marrying her father's money?"

"Try to be sane, Harold. Of course, you've never been in love."

"No, thank you, Aunt."

"Some poor woman should be grateful for the fact."

"Yes . . . I say, Aunt, what do you think of that for a wart?" He held up his hand for inspection. "What's the cause of warts?"

"Dirt," said Aunt Agatha.

"I suppose it is. Hogan has two on the back of his neck . . . I say, I'm going to chuck the rest of these dam' spuds into the pot without peeling them."

"It might be more sanitary, Harold. If it isn't immodest in me I should like to know when you last had a real wash?"

"Reggie and I had a swim in the river a week ago. We must try to save the water we cook with. It's a serious problem this water business. You know, Aunt, people don't appreciate the value of water."

"Don't you miss your morning bath?" There was just the trace of a catch in her voice.

"Frankly, no, dear," said Harold. "That's another tradition, or fallacy, that must go by the board. The Englishman doesn't love his bath: he loves to talk about it: he likes to tell the whole crowd that he wouldn't miss his morning tub for a fortune. He's a liar."

"Your mother is behaving splendidly, Harold?"

"Naturally. She's like me—she doesn't worry about things that cannot be helped."

"How much is there in the family purse, dear boy?"

"Now, you're quizzing, Aunt Agatha. How should I know?"

"Is there any sane project in Reggie's mind?"

"Oh, he has ideas. Let the old boy hatch them."

"We're living from hand to mouth. God knows

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

what will happen to us if we get to the end of our tether."

"We're only just starting, my dear Aunt. Reggie's marvellous when he's had a good dinner. That pheasant the pater poached two days ago sent up Reggie's ideas on wings. He bought a steam yacht and took us around the world for a change. I was his first mate."

"Sir Thomas Shadrow, Baronet, and poacher!"

"Amateur poacher, Aunt Agatha. Don't give him too much credit or it will make him conceited. It was a hen pheasant and this is the breeding season. I told him that a cock was good all the year round, but he couldn't resist that hen. Yes, Reggie's an awfully good scout but so dam' temperamental. Because the pheasant didn't agree with him, he sold that steam yacht before he went to bed."

The conversation was checked by the appearance of a motor-car around the bend of the road.

"It's going to stop!" said Aunt Agatha, fearfully. She gave her soiled breeches one glance and fled precipitately into her tent. Lady Shadrow was reading inside the caravan; the other members of the party were not likely to return from their several tasks until the midday dinner whistle summoned them home.

Harold might not be quick on the uptake as Reggie would have said, but he had learned quite a lot of horse sense since the pilgrimage began. When the car came to a stop in the high-road, he waited until a tall, well-dressed man alighted, an envelope in his hand, before sauntering lazily to meet him. Harold hadn't shaved for two days and Hogan hadn't found the time necessary to trim his hair. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to the elbows and his muddied boots would have broken the heart of a shoe-black.

"Have I the honour of addressing Sir Thomas Shadrow?" said the stranger as he thumbed the long blue envelope he was carrying.

Harold had never actually seen a writ, but he fancied he wouldn't mistake one for an illuminated address. It

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

was that "Have I the honour" that urged him to feel for his gas mask. He didn't like the look of the visitor, either; he smelt of Lincoln's Inn, where lawyers hibernate.

"Sorry," said Harold.

"I've been following him for three weeks," said the stranger.

"How's he travelling?" Harold asked. "Aeroplane or road racer?"

The stranger laughed unpleasantly. (Harold said to himself: "I thought so.")

"He's supposed to be with a caravan party," said the stranger, "but if I've questioned one, I've questioned a hundred. Never mind! We'll get him. He must be within a radius of fifty miles of London, according to my instructions: we'll send out a fleet of cars . . . Thanks, awfully." He began to retrace his steps to the motor-car.

Harold's brain wave began to flow. They would get Sir Thomas if they sent out a fleet of cars in pursuit. It was ill-luck, but it must be circumvented. Hang it all, the little baronet was half-way up the slope that represented escape from trouble. This would tumble him back in despair. Harold hailed his man.

"Would he be travelling as Sir Thomas?" he asked.

"I cannot say."

"Describe him."

The stranger obliged, and the description wasn't flattering.

Harold slapped his thigh. The light had dawned.

"That would be the fellow!" he said, trusting that the working party wouldn't return too quickly. "He told me his real name was Sir Thomas Shadrow, but I didn't believe that."

"You've met him?"

"Last week," said Harold, lying as easily and pleasantly as a lawyer. He described his father more minutely than the stranger had done and added, by way of interest, that *his* Sir Thomas had an old servant with him—an

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

Irishman who might be taken for a half-wit in a bad light. "I came across him on the borders of the New Forest—Wimborne, to be exact. He told me he was heading for Southampton."

"Southampton? I'll phone the Chief Constable." The stranger was excited.

"Do as you please," said Harold, keeping an eye on the wood in the near distance from which he expected the party to emerge. "I ought to tell you that he'd parted with the caravan and was hoping to meet a relative at the port—a cousin, or something like that. He had offered Sir Thomas a free trip to the French coast."

"Damn his eyes!" said the stranger, and turned away again.

"Good news or bad?" Harold asked.

"That's my business," said the stranger, ill-temperedly. Harold went back to his potato-peeling. Aunt Agatha came from her tent.

"Who may he be?" she asked.

"Just a plain 'swine'," said Harold, casually.

Reggie returned with Sadie. Harold told him of the incident.

"Excellent fellow!" said Reggie, and patted him on the shoulder. "We'll pull out to-night and get back to Sussex."

"Into the firing-line?" said Harold.

"The safest place if you don't want to get hit," said Reggie. "Here come the honest toilers. Don't say a word of this to any of them."

They pulled out in the late afternoon, and about that time the private detective was reporting by telephone to Mr. Hiram Jolson, father of Sadie:

"I trailed them into Wiltshire, sir, and there I learned from a 'gippo' that Sir Thomas was last seen near Southampton: he was on his way to France. Do you instruct me to follow?"

"No," said Mr. Jolson. "Better come back to town."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

I'll get the radio people to broadcast ; Sir Thomas is bound to hear of it."

"I'm dreadfully disappointed, sir."

"So am I. Here's a titled man wandering the country in the *belief* that he is a beggar. He's probably hungry, starving, and all the time he's a comparatively well-to-do man. Yes, come right up to town and we'll shape a new schedule."

When the caravan and the trailer pulled out and heaved eastward, the "hungry, starving baronet" was eating a dishful of cold potatoes, left over from the mid-day meal. Lady Shadrow was saying: "My dear! You'll have a dreadful attack of indigestion."

Sir Thomas said: "It's worth it, darling. I helped to pitch eight loads of hay to-day and I'm that hungry I could eat a dead monkey."

The greatest blessing you can confer on any man is to take from him the food he doesn't need and make him work for the food that is essential to his existence.

CHAPTER XII

THAT SLIP OF THE TONGUE

THE House With the Golden Windows was a fairly roomy abode after you had assimilated the wisdom of not mistaking a caravan for a villa or a mansion in the country. The most cumbersome thing to get into a small space is a hasty temper—one of those March wind tempers that blind and bluster, force open locked cupboards, yank out drawers that don't slide easily and scatter their contents on the floor. Noah might have placed only two persons—the wrong persons—in the Ark by themselves and they would have found the place too crowded for their liking.

In the old Army days when anything as large as a rabbit hutch was considered a "posh" billet, twelve privates could dress, undress, sleep, shave and gamble comfortably in a room fifteen feet by ten, and even then they found accommodation for any stray cat or dog that happened along and attached itself to the company. The secret lies in reaching for anything you require, not striding after it : another secret, almost as important, is to put a thing away in its appointed place so that you shall know exactly where to find it when you want it again.

After a week on the road the Shadrow people could have gone to sleep like their horses—standing up !

Phoebe was about the only one who couldn't develop a sense of orderliness. Her father thought this was due to the modern tendency to let somebody else do the job for you if they are foolish enough to do it.

Aunt Agatha, of late, had come to the conclusion that Phoebe exemplified the weakness of her generation : she was reserved, almost morose, and quick-tempered on occasion, accepting conditions as though they had been forced on her through the incompetence of others.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Sadie, big-hearted as ever, was more generous : she argued that the change in their fortunes must have come as a greater shock to Phoebe than to any of the others : she had walked in comparative comfort one moment, holding high her head among those who represented Society : she had learned to expect luxury as part of her portion. The next moment she was poorer than any servant that had been employed in the house.

Lady Shadrow was angelic in her solicitude for Phoebe. Sometimes, in the quiet of the caravan, when the others were at work in the camp, the invalid would reach across and rest a hand on her daughter's.

"Try to think of it all as a merry jest, darling," she would say. "Most of the real joys in life are based on imagination."

This much must be said for Phoebe : she sought to conceal from her mother the pain of disillusionment she was undoubtedly suffering. She might be a trifle bitter in her observations to Sir Thomas, or the others, but she strove hard to convince the invalid that the tumbling down of ideals, the dissipating of dreams, the shattering of social hopes meant little to her.

They had halted one early morning on the way to Guildford. Sir Thomas had taken the two horses to graze ; Reggie and Harold were gone down to a nearby village to replenish stores ; Aunt Agatha was kneeling by the side of a stream where she was giving the Pekingese, Wung, his first decent bath in days ; Sadie was splicing a broken tow-rope.

There was the sound of crashing crockery in the caravan, followed by a half-smothered imprecation. Then Phoebe, looking very ashamed of herself, came down to where Sadie was sitting : her cheeks were aflame ; there was the suspicion of tears in her eyes, the tears of vexation.

"How come, honey ?" said Sadie sympathetically.

"Oh, nothing," said Phoebe, a little wearily. "I—I couldn't find my brown shoes—and—and I forgot that

THAT SLIP OF THE TONGUE

mother was asleep in her bunk. That's all." She nursed her head on a hand, her elbow resting on her knee. "Sadie," she said, and sighed, "I'm an ungrateful little beast, but I can't help it. Sometimes I wish that I had the pluck to go away from you all and take my chance elsewhere."

"Where would you go, honey?"

"Anywhere, Sadie. Take a domestic's job, a land-girl's job—anything."

"Do you think you'd be happier away from us?"

"No, I don't suppose I should be, but—but I'm different from you. I get so 'sore', as you call it, so embittered against the world. I've tried to develop that sense of humour you talk about, but there can't be any seed. I say things I don't mean to say, and I'm annoyed if they're not taken seriously, and I'm angry if they are. Can you understand that type of mind?"

"Yes, I think I can," said Sadie. She placed an arm around the girl's shoulder. "I wish you'd take me more fully into your confidence, dear," she said tenderly. "You did tell me a little about that man you were going to marry if all this hadn't happened, but I wasn't certain that you were being honest with me. Did you love him? And did it give you an awful lot of hurt when it was broken off?"

"No," said Phoebe, resolutely. "I haven't given Carter a second thought since we came away."

"You were not in love with him?"

"No. I've never been in love with anybody, except—except myself! Does that sound ridiculous?"

"Most human beings suffer from the same complaint," said Sadie. "It's called selfishness in some books, but there's a prettier way of putting it. Wasn't it a beautiful youth named Narcissus who had no love to give a wood nymph, but went crazy over his own reflection in a pool? Lots of people are in love with themselves, but it isn't naturally selfishness. I believe that if you hurt anybody's feelings your pain would be greater than theirs."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Phoebe was doubtful about this.

"But would I have the courage to confess it?" she said.

"That's stubbornness," said Sadie. "Mind you, I believe that you will fall in love some day."

"Call me gran'ma, then," said Phoebe and laughed rather bitterly.

"And it will be the last person in the world your friends would have expected you to love."

Phoebe nodded carelessly as though she hadn't quite heard that. She glanced at the caravan and winced.

"Not that I wanted those wretched brown shoes," she said, irrelevantly.

"No," said Sadie, not certain that she understood.

"I absolutely forgot that—that mother was there. I swear it, Sadie."

"Yeah," said Sadie, dryly, and went on with her splicing.

"Mother is so fine— isn't she?"

"I don't remember my own mother," said Sadie, dropping the splicing for a second and looking into the distance, "but I keep saying to myself that I hope she was just like her."

"Never a word of complaint from her lips."

"And always a lady, no matter what goes wrong," said Sadie.

There was a movement of the chintz curtains at the window of the caravan. Lady Shadrow's small, oval face appeared.

"Phoebe, darling," she called softly. "I've found your *bloody* boots!"

Sadie leaped to her feet in horror. Phoebe covered her face with her hands.

"That was just how it sounded," said Lady Shadrow, gently, "but I know you didn't mean it."

Somewhere in the wheatfield behind the caravan a corncrake shrilled mockingly. High overhead a lark poised itself on the crest of the breeze and sang a pæan of praise to the morning sun.

CHAPTER XIII

FALLEN STARS THAT GLITTERED

THEY passed through the town of Guildford and were camped on Worplesdon Common. Magic in the sweep of the wind! Magic in the sea of gorse! They were sitting on top of the world, in truth. White galleons drifted lazily across an azure sky; the birds sang as though their very throats would split, the windows of the caravan laughed in the sunlight.

"The healthiest place in all England," said Hogan. "That's why the Gover'mint put Aldershot over yonder. Aldershot, where the cream of the British Army was trained——"

"Is trained," Harold said, correctively.

"Was trained," said Hogan. "They were all killed in India before I left the Army."

"What of France?" said Reggie.

"I know nothing of France," said Hogan. "That came after my time. There's only one war in his lifetime that a man remembers, and that's the one he fought in. I was too old for France, anyway."

"We might have found you something to do out there, nevertheless," said Reggie.

"Exactly," said Harold. "The ancients were discerning and logical: they pushed the old 'uns into the front line and kept the young men at home to do the real work and carry on the race."

"Or stir up trouble for another war?" said Hogan. "I'd rather not hear any more about France."

Hogan's air of finality impressed everybody save Harold. Sir Thomas was disposed to argue the point. He thought it a tribute to Hogan's individuality that he should insist on the greatness of his own generation.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Harold asked: "Must we listen to the vapourings of a half-wit? How about a couple of trout for supper? I have a feeling that we may find a decent stream in these parts."

"Private property," said Lady Shadrow, warningly.

"I might argue that, my dear," said Sir Thomas.

"You might be catching the trout while you're arguing," said Reggie. "Any old how, we know the law on the matter and we'll propound it when the keeper butts in—if he dare."

"You'll find the tackle in the left-hand cupboard, boy," said Sadie.

They fished. Sir Thomas was unlucky, but happy. He fell into the stream for one thing, and Harold, in showing the others how to cast from a distance of twenty yards, hooked his father in the pants. They came away with half a dozen fair-sized fish and tremendous contempt for "preserved waters" and the rights of lords of the manor.

The evening opened quietly. Reggie, Sadie and Harold were discussing plans for the future and the necessity for replenishing the "treasury", when—woof!—the whole atmosphere of the camp changed, new ideas were born, tremendous projects were conceived and life opened the gates to several glorious vistas.

There came on the Common a one-horse caravan, the like of which the Shadrows had never seen. It was painted after the very latest Chelsea style of advanced art—there were slashes of yellow, hoops of green, daubs of black and flourishes in brown. Running the length of the roof was a signboard with flaring letters:

"THE FAMOUS KORDINSKI! RUSSIAN
DANCER!"

The Rage of London and Paris!
Garden Parties Catered For. Terms Moderate.

The monstrosity came lumbering along until it was

FALLEN STARS THAT GLITTERED

within twenty yards of the Shadrow caravan. A long, lean, red-headed man of thirty-five or forty pitched the reins on the back of the tired horse, surveyed the staring group, made a bombastic gesture and gave them greeting :

“Hail, comrades of the open road and the open sky !”

He sprang to the ground, removed his battered red felt hat, waved it in cavalier fashion, bowed himself double and then set one hand on his breast the while he described a semi-circle in the air with the other. His cheeks were thin, but the skin was as tough as leather and as brown as the leaf in autumn. His long legs were encased in gaiters improvised from brown packing-paper—a very excellent protection against the rain and the thistles of the field. His red hair caught the rays of the sun, now sinking behind the western horizon : it gleamed like a vampire’s beneath the arc lights of a film studio. He declaimed, not pompously, but with uncommonly fine enunciation :

“Life is sweet, brother ! The sun, moon and stars and the wind on the heath ! Who would wish to die ?”

Lady Shadrow had retreated to the sanctuary of The House With the Golden Windows. Hogan, at the bidding of Sir Thomas, stood on guard near the steps prepared to defend his mistress against an army. Reggie and Harold approached the stranger.

“Mr. Kordinski, we presume ?” said Reggie.

Down flopped a shutter that served to block out the only window in the caravan. The head of a blonde in the early forties was squeezed through the aperture. Once upon a time—or in the dusk—the features might have appeared comely, but while the eyes were still round and full the cheeks and chin had been allowed to run to seed. There were layers of flesh that only a steam press could make smooth.

“Kordinski be damned !” said the face at the window in a voice that was reminiscent of the Cockney

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

comedienne in an East End character rôle. "I'm Kordinski—the original Marie Kordinski! See Press notices! His name's Buggs—plain Joe Buggs!"

The human hairpin with the brown-paper gaiters had turned at the sound of the woman's voice. He listened with the courteous forbearance of an Elizabethan knight, bowed with exaggerated politeness, and corrected her in a curiously musical tone:

"Not Buggs, fair lady, but Clarence Brough Fitzherbert, leading juvenile, starred in *The Camel's Back* and other London successes. Not Buggs, lady, but faithfully and sincerely yours, Clarence Brough Fitzherbert!"

By way of reply to this correction, the lady at the window made a noise with her lips that was both contemptuous and vulgar.

"Buggs," she insisted. "Plain Joe Buggs, and what can you expect from a fellow with a lousy name like that?"

Bang went the shutter into position! The blonde was gone. No demon king of pantomime ever disappeared with greater slickness.

Fitzherbert, or Buggs, picked up the thread of conversation, addressing himself to Harold for a few moments, then swinging around to Reggie and completely isolating Harold as though he didn't exist. He conveyed to them the information that he and the fair Marie Kordinski (her real name, he said, was Emily Potts) had been compelled to cancel all their vaudeville engagements rather than submit to the tyranny of music-hall syndicates who expected acknowledged "stars" to take "cut salaries" and be grateful for a paltry hundred pounds a week.

"We bore with their rapacity for an unconscionably long while," said Clarence Fitzherbert, "then turned to open country and open life. Do you blame us, comrades?"

"It was downright courageous of you," said Reggie.

FALLEN STARS THAT GLITTERED

"I wonder if you could change a pound note for me?"

The red-haired hairpin summoned an old-time gleam to his eyes and a regretful note to his voice.

"So sorry, laddie," said he. "It's much too near quarter day to catch me with change in my pocket." He changed the subject. "No doubt our names are household words to you," he said. "The famous Marie Kordinski and her dancing partner, Clarence Fitzherbert. Yet that fame was not achieved without years of hard work." He began to unharness his horse, but his tongue wagged incessantly. The harness was a most amazing network of string, wire and leather. When the aged horse had shuffled out from between the shafts, it shook itself to get the stiffness out of its joints, then wandered away among the gorse and the rank grass of the Common. Fitzherbert called after it with all the gravity of a stage manager sick of his job: "Curtain rises at eight, remember!" He looked at Reggie. "Perhaps you have a little hay I might borrow till we purchase more." And before Reggie could advise him that although they hadn't been on the road very long they knew how many beans made five, Fitzherbert struck a melodramatic attitude, right hand raised above his head, the left holding his ridiculous red felt hat. He riveted his gaze on the sky, the whites of the eyes showing piously. He knelt on one knee. There was a moment of impressive silence. Then he spoke:

"God, destroy the talkies!" he petitioned.

Neither Reggie nor Harold said a word. Fitzherbert arose, breathed relievedly, looked towards the atrocity of a caravan and bowed. They gathered that this appeal to the Almighty was a daily ritual imposed on him by the fat blonde and performed wherever they pitched their camp.

"Now do me the honour of presenting me to the other members of your tribe," said Fitzherbert. "No doubt they will be thrilled to meet the famous Kordinski

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

and Fitzherbert. Don't be diffident, comrades of the open road. In spite of our position in *the* profession, we are children at heart."

They began to walk towards The House With the Golden Windows. A voice as smooth as a farrier's file came from the gaudy Kordinski caravan:

"Clarence Fitzherbert!"

He might not have heard, for he walked on.

"Buggs!"

He stopped as though he had been shot by a sniper from behind. They waited expectantly. The door of the caravan was opened and the fat Marie descended with all the preposterous dignity of a tragedy queen. In an incredibly short space of time she had dressed herself in what appeared to be an old "property" gown; an uncommonly large black hat, reminiscent of the Leghorn days, hid the upper half of her head and face, the big eyes looking through a screen of lace that ran around the sweeping brim. Most striking of all was the Beau Nash ebony walking-stick she carried. She inclined her head towards Reggie and Harold as Fitzherbert said, curtly: "Comrades!"

From that moment, until they reached the Shadrow camp, no one save Marie Kordinski spoke a word—they couldn't have wedged one in with a screwdriver. She told them all they needed to learn about herself and partner. They gathered that if it had not been for the invasion by the talkie films, the two would have been "in management" on their own account. Her sense of art had been sorely affronted by some hundreds of offers cabled to her from Hollywood. She was a singer as well as a dancer and she supposed the Hollywood thugs wanted to avail themselves of the beauty of her diction. Other artistes with less principle might have jumped at these offers, but her first thought was the preservation of the British stage.

Only once during the walk did she make reference to Clarence Fitzherbert, her partner, and then it was to

FALLEN STARS THAT GLITTERED

intimate that they might regard him as a harmless idiot. They had already come to that conclusion, but it wasn't quite fair to Clarence: he proved that he had ideas.

The meeting with the Shadrow party was a joyous affair. Names, or rather titles, were kept outside the conversation. Christian names were considered more friendly—and safer. Even Lady Shadrow was presented as "Virginia" and Marie the Fat took to her instantly: here was an audience that would never tire of listening to reminiscences.

"And you have really been an actress!" Dear Virginia was genuinely impressed.

"An actress?" Marie rolled her eyes as Fitzherbert had done a little while before. "My *dear*! At the top of the bill! . . . Fitzherbert, was I at the top of the bill?"

Clarence bowed. She addressed him still further.

"How many curtains did I get at the Dalston Empire?"—in the tone of one who might say: "Go on! They may not believe me."

"Four, my dear," said Clarence.

"And what did the manager say to me when he came behind? Did he say, 'Miss Kordinski, they've simply eaten your stuff to-night and I'm looking forward to a return date'? Did he say that, Fitzherbert?"

"And more," said Clarence, and looked steadily at Hogan whose nasal twitch had become more noticeable of late. The eyes of the red-haired hairpin glared challengingly. "And *more*, varlet!" he said in a loud voice.

"Buggs!" said the fat blonde.

The tempest passed before it really broke.

"In all my life," said dear Virginia, "I have not been inside a theatre."

"How terrible!" Marie held both hands to her bosom.

"Too late! Too late!" said Fitzherbert, heavily.

"The theatre is dead: the pernicious films have killed it."

"You'd do mighty well in Hollywood," Sadie said to him.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Marie the Fat threw back her head indignantly.

"My *dear*! I was at the top of the bill—not *that*!"

Clarence bowed meekly.

"I got sick of their offers to go out there—didn't I, Clarence?" (He had turned to speak to Reggie and didn't reply.)

"Buggs! I got sick of their dam' offers—didn't I?"

"You did, my dear."

"Did I tell them that films were for nursemaids and half-wits? Did I say that, or didn't I?"

"You did, my dear. I was about to observe that although the theatre is dead, it will be resurrected—nay, it will be restored to its rightful place in the category of essentials to human happiness, and——"

"Did I tell the celluloid cesspool stirrers of Hollywood, the corrupters of morals, the destroyers of happy homes, that they could stick their contracts——"

"Let me make you a cup of tea," said Sadie, hastily.

"I never 'tea'," said Marie the Fat and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

Reggie, understanding, expressed regret that they hadn't anything else to offer. "To be quite frank," he said, "we have very little tea. We are pretty badly bent, financially."

"How beautifully honest!" said Marie the Fat. "What are you 'working'?"

"Oh, anything—here and there. Picking up little jobs as we go along."

She pressed the tip of a finger to her right temple. Then:

"Clarence! We'll team up!"

"Delighted!" said Clarence. He surveyed the company. "Here," he said impressively, "we may have the nucleus of the finest combination on the road, Marie Kordinski, famous danseuse, Clarence Fitzherbert, world-renown——"

"Buggs!"—from Marie.

FALLEN STARS THAT GLITTERED

"Splendid!" said Reggie. "We have the material, all right, but who's going to put up the capital?"

And it was here that the freak convinced them that he had something beneath his red thatch.

"Capital?" He made a pass at the air. "What is capital? Coin of the realm? Treasury notes? Bah! Now——"

"Buggs! Don't be long-winded," said Marie. "We know what capital is, you pie-can. It's dough. Now say your piece like you was Charlie Cochran."

"Capital, my dear, is your brains," said Clarence, refusing to be diverted now he had got into his stride. "Brains, my dear—brains."

"Then you start as a bankrupt," said Marie the Fat decisively; and she bowed to an imaginary gallery.

"Any fool could start a road show with money," said Clarence, warming rather than freezing under her interruption. "Any fool. You could," pointing a thin finger at Sir Thomas who edged away from the group. "But it takes the grey matter to launch an Incomparable Combination of Talent without—without——"

"Two blinkin' quid in the whole caboodle," said Marie the Fat, natural coarseness asserting itself as she became weary of his grandiloquence.

"Exactly!" said Sir Thomas from a safe distance.

"Exact—nothing," said Fitzherbert. He shot out a long finger again, and indicated Aunt Agatha, who was sitting on an empty box near the caravan steps. The Peke, Wung, was Aunt Agatha's standby when ennui threatened. Though she might be intolerant of most humans, she was uncommonly patient with animals. She had taught the Peke a score of amusing tricks and the Peke appeared to take as much delight in them as she herself. At the moment Fitzherbert directed the attention of the others, Wung was dexterously balancing a ball on his nose. "There you are!" said Fitzherbert triumphantly. "Look at 'Little Pansy', there! What do you

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

people see in her ? A rather stout, old-fashioned human antimacassar——”

“How dare you ?” said Aunt Agatha, getting to her feet.

“Hush,” said Marie the Fat. “It’s the temperament of genius. I know him when he’s in this mood. Go on, Clarence, darling !”

Fitzherbert crouched, his hands upraised to ward off some attacker.

“But what do I see ?” he hissed. “I see her fearlessly facing lions in a cage ! Or wolves ! Or tigers ! Or——”

“Let’s keep to Pokes for a minute,” said the practical Reggie.

“Very well,” said Fitzherbert, straightening himself, relaxing, and wiping the perspiration from his forehead. “We’ll begin again.”

“And don’t throw a fit this time,” counselled Marie the Fat, who had relaxed her muscles also. “It only makes you thirsty.”

Fitzherbert propounded his ideas and even Harold observed that there was some semblance of horse-sense in them. The whole crowd might form an Entertainment Company, singing, dancing, and so forth. Marie Kordinski, who had been at the top of the bill for years, could supply the star turn. Aunt Agatha (she became “Aggie” before the breaking up of the conference) could dress up Wung and present him in all his tricks. Reggie and Harold thought that with Hogan they could start an old-fashioned boxing booth, and . . . Thus they talked, modifying their ambitions the longer they talked. If Fitzherbert could have had a bottle of beer every five minutes, said Marie, the Company would have opened at the London Coliseum that very night. She remembered the day, she said, when two unexpected whiskies and sodas caused him to buy Barnum and Bailey’s whole outfit and hire Hyde Park in which to pitch the circus.

Still, the red-headed fellow had come as a tonic to the Shadrow party. Phoebe appeared to be mightily taken

FALLEN STARS THAT GLITTERED

with the idea of starting a show, and Reggie was certain that if they made a tour of the country villages they would pick up a respectable living. He didn't confess that Mr. Buggs had started a whole chain of ideas running through his head.

Marie the Fat might have belonged to a temperamental profession in an earlier day, but hard knocks had made her practical in the things that matter.

"Contracts will be ready for signing in the morning," she announced facetiously. "How do we celebrate, to-night? Somebody should fling a party and provide the 'eats'."

Clarence Fitzherbert pointed in the direction of the town of Guildford.

"Yonder lies the oasis in the desert," said he. "My comrade"—he rested a hand on Reggie's shoulder—"will accompany me. In the market square I will declaim the death of Caesar as Marc Antony might not have been able to declaim it. I will so work upon the feelings of the populace that their gratitude shall loosen the strings of their purse."

"Go to it, Buggs," said Marie, evidently accustomed to this "emergency stunt" of his. "But don't spout too long or the shops will close. Get some grub. And pickles—gerkins! And cheese—red cheese! And a bottle of stout, if it'll run to it."

Reggie was as game as the other fellow. Why not? All that he had to do was to "announce" to the crowd that might gather that "this brilliant actor, reduced to his present plight by the films and the general world trade depression", would give them of his best. Then, while they were dozing under the insidious influence of a bucketful of Shakespeare, Reggie would go around with the hat and take up the collection!

Late evening on the Common: The camp fire glowed, the stars looked down and winked. The buskers had not yet returned, but Marie the Fat was very complacent.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

She said that Fitzherbert had seldom failed her during the whole of the time they had been on the road together. The police had "nabbed" him once for causing an obstruction, but he had talked to them so volubly that they had been glad to let him go. She remarked, as an after-thought, that she was really very fond of "old Buggs", and this led her to make reference to his mental capacity. She dropped all affectation, and spoke most sympathetically.

"Clarence comes of a good family," she said, "but the worst of these good families is that they intermarry so's to keep the money from leaking out. Not that Clarence's crowd had the Mint to play with; it never took less than a writ to dig any out of them.

"Well, what's the result of cousin marrying cousin and that sort of thing? The blood gets thin, and the brain gets soggy. In short, they get loopy, bats in the belfry, up-the-pole! You know what I mean?

"Harmless, mark you, once you get used to their ways. When Clarence first teamed up with me—when we made a double turn of it—he nearly drove me crazy with his mad ideas, but bit by bit I've cured him.

"The funeral bit is the hardest to rub out of his system. He loves funerals. I suppose he inherited the madness, and can't help it, but it does try a woman's patience at times.

"He loves to cry! Lor'! How he cries! Real tears, too—they come from the pit of that drain-pipe of a stomach he's got. He don't care whose funeral it is—he steps off the pavement, down goes his nut, his chin in his hand, and he walks along with the mourners as happy as hell in his misery.

"When he had 'em to wear, he used to dash home and get into funeral clothes—black coat and trousers and silk hat. (They went long ago.) Once, he heard of a Big Noise being buried that afternoon. He didn't know his name and he didn't care. He was doing a bit of shopping for me at the time and was haggling over the

FALLEN STARS THAT GLITTERED

price of a cauliflower when he was told the funeral started from the Mansion at three. He dropped the cauliflower and his top teeth on the shop counter and raced home as though a wasp had taken up sleeping quarters in his pants. He couldn't speak to me, he was that excited, but I could hear him sobbing like a wet wind in his room and that sort of comforted me. I knew what was what.

"They told me that he met the funeral half-way to the cemetery. He held up his hand, and believe me, that funeral party, half a mile in length, was stopped. He climbed up on the hearse along with the driver, buried his face in his handkerchief, and cried that hard the driver cried with him. You see the driver thought he was a relative of the dead man. Clarence didn't even know his name.

"Oh, yes, Clarence's got a leak in his head somewhere, but it isn't worth worrying about. He was swanking to me one day about how he took three encores! He kept saying, 'I'm a clever fellow, I am.' And I was in the mind to humour him—up to a point. 'Your trumpeter's dead,' I said thoughtless. 'What?' he said, and upstairs he went at the double to change into his funeral black. I let him go, thinking he deserved it.

"He got to the cemetery, so I heard, and found the grave-digger at work. He stood over the hole and sobbed. 'What's wrong with you?' said the grave-digger. 'My trumpeter's dead,' said Clarence. The grave-digger knew him and his little ways so he let him go on sobbing till it was dark and the job was finished.

"But Clarence is a good scout to have around. He can do most anything, and you can take it from me that if you team up with us you'll be on the dinkiest bit of velvet you can imagine."

The buskers returned to the camp heavily laden with tinned food, some bloaters, pickles, two new loaves, a few bananas, and fifteen shillings! Reggie wanted to roll on the grass and roar with laughter, but he fancied

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

he saw a glistening in the eye of Sir Thomas and a twitching of the lips of his mother, the gentle Virginia, so he controlled his mirth and whispered to Sadie that he would "give her the works" when they were alone.

Buggs made no reference to his adventure in Guildford. Marie the Fat appeared to accept it as an ordinary occurrence. The feast was spread, the tins of salmon and soup were opened; and dignity, sitting on the horizon, gave the little baronet one last reproachful look and left him toasting a particularly juicy bloater over the glowing fire, the while he licked his lips in anticipation.

CHAPTER XIV

"A WANDERING MINSTREL, I"

THE nucleus of what came to be known as "Shadd Rowe's Merrie England Fair" would not have been very inspiring to a London entrepreneur, but there was tremendous enthusiasm behind it and that is always worth fifty per cent. of the capital. Reginald appointed himself manager and tacitly conveyed to the others, and all who came afterwards, that if anybody disputed his authority there would be a strange face standing outside the gates of Paradise on the morrow. The Kordinskis, as they came to be "billed", were among the first to recognize originality of outlook in both Reggie and Sadie, and they gave a lead in loyalty to the others.

The idea of an old-fashioned fair had its inception in a more or less learned disquisition by Harold the historian as he lay on his back by the camp fire shortly after the Kordinskis joined the outfit. Supper was finished and the company was in the mood to rest and dream, and pow-wow beneath the stars. It was a joyous night with just that musical hum of insect life in the grass and the air to stir romance.

Marie the Fat, without the slightest trace of conceit in her voice, had been relating anecdotes of her early life on the stage, and with a sigh of resignation she had said: "But those days are past and gone. The old troupers are no more. The people have forgotten those who used to cheer 'em with song and dance and help 'em get through their work next day." She had paused there and turned a stern gaze on Mr. Buggs who was lying flat on his back and blowing smoke-rings into the still air. "Did you keep the oath, this evening, Clarence?" she inquired.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Mr. Buggs sat up, nodded affirmatively, and lay down again.

The Shadrows learned to accustom themselves to the observance of this Kordinski ritual. Wherever he might be, at sundown, Clarence Brough Fitzherbert dropped on his knees and made appeal: "God, destroy the talkies!" It was embarrassing, inconvenient sometimes, especially if the Company should be passing through a country town, but Reggie argued that they wouldn't have protested against a Turk making his appeal at sundown, so why limit the privileges of a Christian?

The sincerity of Mr. Buggs in this daily devotion was not to be impugned by incongruity of incident. Once, it took a village constable a full half-hour to change his decision to lock the devotee up for using profane language in public. And once, Mr. Buggs, while wearing a pair of light-coloured riding-breeches which he had picked up cheaply, second-hand, knelt down on the very spot where Wung, the Pekingese, had "knelt" a short while before. The earnestness of the petition that evening was jeopardized by the remarks passed on Wung.

To revert to Harold's disquisition. Seeking to solace Marie for the passing away of her glory, as it were, he advanced the theory that death, and unalterable change, were terms that should not be accepted literally. There was no death, he said; no progress in fact. We moved in cycles and returned again and again to our beginnings. Applying the argument to her own profession, he said that the theatre and the music-hall would live and flourish again. The old tunes, the old songs, the old styles of entertainment could never be eradicated completely from the heart of the people. There was always a yearning to travel back along the Road and begin again. To accept the past as death was to resign oneself to the mortality of the body—inevitable, perhaps, but a depressing inevitability. Oh, Harold talked quite a lot that summer evening and only Reggie and Sadie

"A WANDERING MINSTREL, I"

were awake when he finished. Then Reggie said to Sadie :

"We'll open as old-time English mummers at the next good-sized village. Call rehearsals to-morrow."

It may sound too simple, but it was done. On the village green they did it. The caravan formed the background. The orchestra was a wheezy melodeon which Hogan dug out of his belongings and explained for Aunt Agatha a ghostly mystery of Highfield Court in the old days—the mystery of agonized wailing in the dead of night.

The Kordinskis "did their stuff", Harold and Reggie gave an excellent imitation of an old English bare-knuckle prize-fight, Aunt Agatha and Wung, the Peke, gave an "Animal turn". Sadie, the irrepressible, trilled in a light and musical soprano, Phoebe gave pride a slap in the ribs, blackened her face with burnt cork, and sang coon songs. Sir Thomas, clad in a pierrot's costume contrived from remnants supplied by the Kordinskis, waddled among the villagers on the green and took up a collection. Virginia, the invalid, sat at the door of the caravan and watched the proceedings with all the delight of a child at its first pantomime.

Did the villagers accept the offering with gratitude and appreciation? They did not—in the sense, the artistic sense, that would have satisfied the soul of Marie the Fat, who had figured in her heyday at the top of the bill. Why? Because the villagers of England had become so sophisticated that they talked easily and familiarly of Greta Garbo, and Douglas Fairbanks, Ramsay Macdonald, the Premier, and Philip Snowden, the Chancellor. They had their motor-cycles and their motor coaches which took them hundreds of miles during a week-end; they had their radios and gramophones and daily newspapers; they had every luxury in the form of entertainment that was available to the dwellers in the cities. The rustic of England didn't stand still when the rest of the world turned over during

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

the Great War. Those who were drawn into the Army learned all that an army has to teach and they took their knowledge back to the villages and hamlets.

Oh, no ! There was no idea of fooling the gathering on that green into the belief that London had taken compassion on their isolation and simplicity and had sent a galaxy of inimitable talent to drive away their blues. There were no rustics with straws in their hair, mud-stained gaiters on their legs, and their dead grandfather's rags hanging on their limbs. The English villager to-day studies the cut of his clothes with greater fastidiousness than the Mayfair exquisite of twenty years ago. He hasn't studied those Easy Payment advertisements for nothing ; and he demands value for every instalment he pays under the threat of not paying the next when due.

The young men of this village in which the Shadrow party was staged came to laugh and remained to applaud because the nimble wit of Reginald the Fool recalled that disquisition of his brother Harold. It was after the first half-hour and just as they were nearing the end of their repertoire. Marie, the "star", had been given the "raspberry"—a form of criticism which consists of a vulgar sound like that made by a cow's foot when it is withdrawn from the mud, and shrill whistling and ungallant remarks about the anatomy of the performer. When poor Aunt Agatha, desperately anxious to prove her worth to the "management", was introduced as "Diana with her Marvellous Chinese Human Quadruped", one wit shouted encouragingly : "Never mind your pup—show us your calf !" When Clarence Brough Fitzherbert began his attack on Shakespeare, the enemy put over a counter barrage of sauce and a few vegetables. It was then that Reggie gave Hogan instructions and himself leaped towards the footlights or where the footlights might have been.

"Now, boys," he shouted to the audience. "You were in the jolly old Army with us—" most of them

"A WANDERING MINSTREL, I"

must have been children during those War days, but that didn't matter—"so how about some of the old songs? Let her rip, Hogan!"

"Down by the stream,
Where the water melons grow
Back to my home
I wish to go . . ."

They took up the chorus as greedily as ducks taking up worms from a pond. They couldn't get enough. When Reggie's memory failed they supplied the song. And the Army songs they sang brought a blush to the cheeks of Marie Kordinski who was familiar with them, and a look of perplexity to the eyes of the other women who were not conversant with the lingo.

They were still singing when one of them happened to look at his watch. The awful warning was passed around that within ten minutes the doors of the "Pig and Pumpkin" inn would be closed for the night. The stampede followed, but not before two or three pounds had been contributed to the caravan funds.

"There you are," said Reggie, triumphantly. "The newspapers say 'give the people the best of music'. I say, 'let 'em sing their own dam' songs'. I know which they prefer."

Altogether, it was a memorable night. The receipts didn't justify their writing a letter to the newspapers about "records", but Sadie, the opportunist, with her national appreciation of publicity, hid herself in the caravan while the others lazed around the camp-fire. She wrote a most interesting news-story for the editor who had bought her early snapshots and sent his camera man to the Epsom camp.

In due course that article was published. It told an amused public that somewhere in the South of England a member of the British aristocracy was putting up the fight of his life against misfortune. He was singing in the rain. He was at the head of the Shadd Rowe Merrie England Fair Company, supported by a band of brilliant

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

entertainers who refused to believe that the old British Lion was sickening of a fever in spite of heart-breaking taxation. It told of mysterious ladies and gentlemen of social rank who were masquerading as troubadours. It piqued curiosity. It ensured engagements for garden parties. It inspired hopes. It was an advertisement a thousand pounds couldn't have purchased in the ordinary way of business. And Sadie was paid for it.

Newspaper reporters trailed the caravan, but, astute though they were, they didn't "make contact" with Sir Thomas Shadrow, Baronet. Reggie, Sadie, and Phoebe saw to that. Either he was gone away to engage new talent, or he was in town arranging for the lease of a theatre. In truth, the little coterie was not quite satisfied that the old gentleman had completely divested himself of that foolish pride which will cause even an aristocratic corpse to protest against the unseemly pace of the cortege.

Only the gentle-voiced Virginia could rightly appreciate the change that was taking place in the character of Sir Thomas. It might have disturbed the peace of mind of the others; it left her with a feeling of gratitude that couldn't be expressed in words.

During the month following that first village performance, Sir Thomas frequently absented himself of an evening. Only Lady Shadrow refrained from comment. One night he returned with a pheasant and two rabbits and placed them in the "larder" without offering a word of explanation.

The following night he brought back a companion—a dissolute, reserved old man with a foxy face mostly covered with hybrid whisker. He did not introduce him: he gave the others the impression that he didn't consider them good enough to be introduced to his newly-found friend.

The two sat together near the fire and only very few words passed between them. They smoked pipes: Sir Thomas lit the spill for the guest or held a burning

"A WANDERING MINSTREL, I"

brand to his pipe. He did this with remarkable subserviency—simplicity worshipping at the shrine of Knowledge.

When the time came for the visitor to depart, his host accompanied him as far as the edge of the pine wood in the near distance, then returned with a good deal of satisfaction and sat down again to the blaze of the comforting fire. There was anxiety in the eyes of the beholders (except Lady Shadrow): there was the ecstasy of youth in his.

Reggie asked: "Who was the old guy, pater?"

Sir Thomas roused himself from a reverie.

"Hush, my boy," he said. "You must be more respectful. His ears are as keen as a hare's."

"I would have taken him for a poacher," said Harold, casually.

"And, for once, you are right," said Sir Thomas. "And he's one of the finest poachers that ever laid a snare."

"Doesn't talk much, does he?" said Sadie.

"Women might profit from his example," said Sir Thomas, and looked again at the fire.

"I thought he smelt considerably," said Harold. "Perhaps that is his compensating faculty for loss of speech."

"Aniseed, my boy, aniseed," said Sir Thomas, proud of his newly-acquired knowledge. "That's his secret."

Phoebe said: "Do you mean to say that *you* have been poaching?"

"Not exactly—not exactly," said Sir Thomas, in a regretful, yet hopeful tone. "I couldn't fairly describe my part as that of a poacher. Not yet. There's so much to learn." He sighed as though he feared the art were beyond his capabilities.

They believed that for once he was jesting and with a laugh they went to their several tasks. Lady Shadrow remained by the side of her man who was still staring at visions in the fire. When the two of them were alone,

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

she reached out a hand and lightly patted his forearm.

"Keep tight hold of it, my dear," she said. "That boyish spirit is worth all the gold in the world."

He turned to smile at her, and with a tender movement stroked the back of the white hand that rested on his arm.

"You understand," he said gratefully, "and that's all that matters. I met that old fellow, Ezra, two or three days ago, but I didn't say anything about him because—well, I wasn't sure of myself. They say that adversity makes strange bedfellows, Virginia. How remarkable a thing it is that so many of us go through life without seeing the glories that are around us. It has to be left to the last person imaginable to show us all we are missing."

"He appeared to be a very poor man, my dear," said Lady Shadrow.

"Richer than a king who sits on a golden throne, Virginia," said he. "Why, the whole of the wild is his kingdom. He made me feel ashamed of my wasted years—the lounging in snobbery, the self-imprisonment. I've lived in the country all my life thus far and yet . . . What was it that Wordsworth wrote? 'A primrose by a river's brim, a yellow primrose was to him, and it was nothing more.' That might fairly be said of most of us."

"But not of you, my dear—not of you," she said gently. He shook his head protestingly.

"Old Ezra has made me realize that when I get to the end of the Road I shall be placed among those who are blind of vision, if not of heart."

"Dear me," she whispered, "I never heard you talk like this before, but I've known that it was in your heart. It was just convention, shall we say, that kept your lips closed."

He nodded to his thoughts as he went on:

"Old Ezra knows every bird and its season. He has

"A WANDERING MINSTREL, I"

had no education as we understand it, but his knowledge of the wild is so profound that it makes book knowledge seem like nonsense. And it makes God real. Oak and elm and ash and beech. I had never given them a second thought until he nudged me and whispered: 'They know what you're thinking. Watch 'em and you'll see their breasts heave. They're the listeners of the woods, and all that the world is saying and doing is stored up in their hearts for the generations to come.' Fieldfares and redwing thrushes, stonechats, greenfinches. He knows them all, does Ezra, and I felt so poor when I had to confess that with all my education I didn't know these things by sight or name. It seemed to me that I knew only how to dress correctly for dinner. It seemed, too, that God was rather sorry for me, and so mighty proud of Ezra."

"Does he live by poaching, dear?" Virginia asked.

"He takes only what he requires for food," said he, adding, with a challenging flourish of the head, "and why shouldn't he?"

She nodded her acceptance of the sentiment.

"I've often wondered," she said, joying in the conversation, "why birds, being able to fly, don't get away from the heat and smoke of cities. I've seen hundreds of sparrows and pigeons perched on the façade of the National Art Gallery in town, and I've felt so sorry for their ignorance of all the beauties of the fields ten or twenty miles away."

"Birds love the places where they are born," he said, and she surmised that he was merely quoting from the old poacher's storehouse of knowledge. "They return to the same places, but some of them like to roam, just like humans. They go away and found new colonies. While we were on the edge of the wood an aeroplane sailed overhead, and Ezra said he fancied that when men could fly without fear they would follow the instinct of the birds and you'd have whole nations changing their localities. Man shouldn't stay in one

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

place all his life, he said, if he had the means to get away. It wasn't natural. Ezra may not be able to read, but he chooses his living books uncommonly well. I couldn't teach him anything, but he was telling me of a talk he had with a tramp one day and it was easy to see that he'd remember that tramp long after he'd forgotten old Tom Shadrow. The tramp said that if you went back, life was nothing more than a history of migration like the birds. In the old days they cast lots to decide who should migrate, pass on, found new colonies, so that those remaining behind might have more room and food. The trouble with modern man is that he's a gregarious animal instead of a migratory." He broke off to stir the fire. When he sat back, he said: "These have been wonderful days to me, Virginia, but I'm afraid I've been selfish. What of you, my dear?"

"This life has made a new woman of me," said Virginia. "Everyone is so kind to me."

"People can't help being kind to you," he said. "Why—why—" he laughed a little foolishly—"I've fallen in love with you all over again."

She pressed a little closer to him; the pale cheeks were flushed.

"Have we ever been out of love, my dear?" she asked.

"But—but the years, the years?"

"Your heart is still young. And so is mine," said Virginia.

He gave his shoulders a shake as though he were impatient with himself.

"We never talked like this in the old days," he said, and smiled.

Virginia sighed, but not reproachfully.

"I should have loved it," she said, gently.

"I dare say I should too," he confessed, "but I suppose we both felt that it wasn't—well, quite the thing. Eh?"

"I suppose so, dear. One has to make so many sacrifices to appearances."

"Virginia, ever since we set out on this wonderful

"A WANDERING MINSTREL, I"

journey I have had the suspicion that it was all a jest contrived by Reggie."

"Perhaps it is, dear. I don't wish to question him too closely."

"Perhaps it is," he echoed. "That's what I've come to *fear*, Virginia."

"You don't want to go back to the old days?"

"It would be like going back to my grave," he said.

"Is it possible that this is Sir Thomas Shadrow speaking? How you have changed!"

"For the better or the worse, Virginia?"

"I think you're splendid," she said.

"I wish I were a little younger."

"You will never be old."

"Virginia?"

"*'Tom'*?"

"Bless my soul, how strange that sounds."

"Do you remember the first time I used that name?" she asked.

"Do I? It set me dancing—in my heart," said he.

"It's the simple little things that make up all that's best in romance, Tom."

Near the edge of the wood in the distance, where the purple of evening was blending with the grey of dusk, a sleepy bird woke up and called to its mate—the last call before the light went completely out of the sky. The call was answered—a soft, reassuring note; then silence, and the purple deepened. Down in the valley a curtain of mist rose slowly, impressively, as though it were a blanket seeking to cover the sleepers of the wild.

"Romance," said Sir Thomas, dreamily. He lowered his head and touched her hand with his lips. As he raised his head again she leaned a little nearer and set her lips on his.

Too old to love? Too old for romance? When the heart is free of the fetters of man-made law and convention, free of snobbery and affectation, it is for ever young.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

They heard the voices of the returning family. Lady Shadrow hastened to ask him a question that had perturbed her considerably of late. What of Phoebe? What of her future?

"I, too, have worried about that," he said. "I know that she should be given an opportunity of meeting those people who belong to the set that——"

She stayed him there, with an impatient little gesture.

"You were so sincere, I thought, a moment ago," she chided.

"Oh, I don't want her to consider herself above the people we are meeting to-day," he said, "but—but is it fair to her?"

"The set we have left behind us will not wish to meet her, now. Supposing she met someone——"

"Down and out like ourselves, Virginia?" He began to bridle up; she only laughed.

"We are not down and out, dear man," she reminded him.

"I had great ambitions so far as Phoebe is concerned," he said.

"You are still a snob, *Tom*?"

"She might fall in love with a tramp, my dear."

"If the tramp were as happy as you and I, it might mean more to Phoebe than riches and position. Say so, *Tom*."

"No, no. Don't let me say anything that I don't quite agree with."

"You are still hoping and hoping that one day we shall have reached the end of this glorious make-believe and return to our prison at Highfield Court. Is that it?"

"Most assuredly not, Virginia. Never let me hear you say that again."

"I shall never want to say it," said Virginia. She added softly: "To-morrow may bring to Phoebe all that her heart desires most. Let us hope for that, my dear. Let us even pray for it."

And Fate, sitting on the edge of the clouds, might have agreed that the time was come to weave a little more romance into the open life of the Shadrow family.

CHAPTER XV

LIGHT O' LOVE

THE whole party had returned ; they were crowding around the red glow of the camp fire, for even on a warm summer night there is magic in the welcome of a fire. Everybody was in good spirits, everybody had a brilliant idea for the immediate future. Marie Kordinski had reached again the top of that bill which represented to her the highest point in the firmament of fame. In the flush of her ecstatic day-dreaming she was magnanimity itself towards her partner. She addressed him as "Clarence Brough" even when she had need to ask him if he had observed his daily ritual.

Aunt Agatha was insisting on Sadie calling her "Aggie", saying that it sounded more friendly.

Reggie was addressing a mythical mighty throng in the Coliseum he hoped, one day, to control.

Harold was talking to himself.

Then came that mysterious pause which, in the narrow, prosaic life of town dwellers, causes someone to remark : "I'll bet it's twenty minutes past the hour."

And breaking into the silence of the summer night came the sound of a rich full baritone raised in song, the rumbling wheels of caravan playing an accompaniment that was singularly musical and in keeping with the sentiment of the song :

"On the Road ! On the Road !
On the long grey rolling Road
With the blue sky above
And the wind that I love
And a fond heart to lighten my load.
Do I envy a king on a throne of gold ?
Do I envy the birds on high ?
Do I ask for more ? Do I sigh for more ?
Not I ! Not I ! Not I !"

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Reggie spoke, and his brows were contracted.

"In all my life," he said, "I don't think I've ever heard a gipsy sing, although I've read that they do."

From out of the deep dusk came two caravans. The song ceased as the camp was reached. The singer leaped down from the driver's seat of the leading 'van, and with measured gait strode towards the little, expectant group.

He was a tall, finely-knit, swarthy man of thirty. He removed his wide-brimmed felt hat and bowed courteously. And in a voice that still held the rhythm of the song they had heard, he addressed them :

"I give you good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My horses are tired. We pulled out from Oxford at daybreak. Have you a place at your fire to offer? Give me good company and the day's well spent."

He straightened his shoulders and threw back his dark-haired head. There was deep sincerity in the light of his eyes, gallantry in his whole poise.

"This is no gippo," Reggie whispered to Sadie, and stepped forward to greet the stranger.

"You are welcome," he said, "so long as you don't ask for much and don't take too much for granted. Your name ?"

"Ricardo, sir. Just Ricardo."

"Your line ?"

"Gymnast, animal trainer, general organizer. Always ready to serve so long as the master is worthy of being obeyed. No tastes to imperil a purse nor jeopardize good breeding."

"Working alone ?"

"'Sancho Panza', my man, is asleep in the wagon behind. He has slept since daybreak. He shall sleep till dawn. Then, he shall go without sleep until the work, whatever its nature, is done."

Reggie might be a sentimentalist at heart, but he had an excellent sense of the apposite—when a plain blunt truth should be applied.

LIGHT O' LOVE

"All right," he said. "You may join us for the night, but cut out the slop—we have enough of that already. Unharness, water your horses, and by that time there may be a bit of grub going. I'll see about it."

"An it please you, sir," said the stranger, bowing again. "And your name? If I may be so bold?"

"The Top Dog in this outfit," said Reggie, bluntly.

Phoebe had moved quietly and unobserved to The House With the Golden Windows. From the steps she looked back and across the heads of the group. The stranger lifted his gaze at that moment: the glow of the fire suffused his cheeks and exaggerated the largeness of his round eyes. She was conscious of a rush of warmth through the whole of her body. She passed into the caravan and, in the darkness within, trembled, though she could not have said why.

Darkness and silence all around. So still the air that the grey ash of the camp-fire remained unstirred, the incense of charred wood mingling with a thousand other aromatic scents of the night.

Darkness and silence in the weald. Darkness and mystery in the pine wood behind.

Silence in the caravan save the wild beating of a young heart freeing itself from the corroding chains of modern conception of life and love.

Through the open window the night air came to cool her cheeks and inflame the passion that had been bridled too long.

The shadows watched and listened with her.

Fragments of early girlhood dreams—dreams that had been shattered by worldly insistence on Reality—gathered themselves together in a magical whole that made of life itself a glorious privilege. The full, round eyes looked into the darkness and yearned for that which they had lost in their pursuit of empty pleasure.

And compassionate night, leaguering itself with sweet

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

romance, stilled the natural whispering of the wild as the troubadour sang on :

"Ah! Wake not yet from thy repose
A fair dream spirit hovers near thee,
Weaving a web of gold and rose
Through dreamland's happy isles to bear thee!"

Beautiful in their sonorousness, eloquent in their avowal of passion, the cadences rose and fell. The young heart quivered with the exquisite joy that touches pain. The troubadour sang on :

"Sleep, love, it is not yet the dawn.
Angels guard thee, sweet love, till morn."

Who so base of thought, so dead of soul that feels not the ecstasy of life stirring anew at the liquid voice of heart speaking to heart?

Whose shoulders have not brushed the stars when the wings of love have borne him upward, ever upward, till the earth beneath, and all its travail, has lost its meaning in the haze of immeasurable distance?

"Angels guard thee, sweet love, till morn!"

From somewhere in the darkness the voice of the iconoclast came. It might have been Hogan; it might have been Wung, the Peke; it might have been Mr. Buggs. It came with the hollow, heartless howl of a winter wind :

"For the love of Mike, put a blinkin' sock in it and let me get to sleep."

CHAPTER XVI

THE WATER NYMPH

RICARDO was handsome; moreover, he was useful. He might have the soul of the poet, but he was not a visionary. Ten minutes' conversation with him convinced Reggie that the Apollo might prove a valuable addition to the company of pilgrims.

No questions were asked concerning his nationality: Reggie reasoned that he might be an Italian, or a Roumanian, or a Turk, but he did not see that it made any difference so long as he had brains in the right place.

The information that Ricardo volunteered about himself was not very comprehensive, but it was gathered that he held a commission in the Army during the four years' trouble. He had discovered what was left so many temporary gentlemen to discover—in time of peace an officer out of work arouses no more compassion than an illiterate beggar: indeed, the fact that he has been an officer seems, only too often, to awaken the latent vindictiveness and malice that is in most of us. With what joy we leap at the chance to say: "It's my turn, now!"

Ricardo preserved just that little touch of mystery about himself that invests with what one calls individuality. He was a fellow of excellent temper even when he was conscious of that atmosphere of hostility which generally arises when the meaner mind attributes conceit to the greater.

Marie the Fat, for example, wondered if Ricardo thought he was a line higher in the bill than she herself. This wonderment gave birth to suspicion. Was he a philanderer? Had he run away from his wife? Was he eluding justice?

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

If the country had been at war, Marie would have had him shot as a spy at every dawn.

Then she told him of her own past glories on the music-hall and his gentle, "I'll wager you were marvellous," gained him a firm seat in her heart. When next she saw Mr. Buggs she found so many flaws in the human hairpin that he was tempted to send up another petition—and not necessarily about the "talkies".

Ricardo's readiness to throw in his lot with the crowd was satisfactory to everybody, and especially so to Phoebe. On the morning following his arrival she watched him exercising on the greensward and her young and imaginative mind envisaged a Greek god. The sombre pine woods formed a background of deep purple. The morning sun caressed the beautifully conditioned body of the gymnast and athlete. Around his loins he had clasped a "property" leopard skin. He went through the exercises as though he enjoyed them; he turned his back to the sun, raised his arms above his head, and moved the magnificent shoulder muscles until the upper part of his body resembled an ordnance map.

There was mystery, romance, and provocative reticence about Ricardo, but his only companion in the caravan was a human oddity. "Sancho Panza", as Ricardo called his servant, though he might have keenly resented the designation of "Don Quixote" if applied to himself, did not make the acquaintance of the Shadrows until noon of the first day of his stay in the party. Then Ricardo blew three sharp blasts on a whistle and shouted, sonorously: "On parade!" No sergeant-major could have done it more authoritatively.

Almost instantly, as though he had been awaiting the summons for some time, an uncommonly fat man rolled out of the caravan, fell on the grass, rolled over like a ball and regained his feet with a curious body action. It was seen that he had but one arm, the other having been taken off close to the shoulder. The head

THE WATER NYMPH

of "Sancho" was ridiculously small, and the hair had been cropped so closely that from a short distance it looked as though the head were shaved. He waddled across to the camp fire where the midday meal was being cooked, halted near his master who had taken a seat on a box near Phoebe, blinked in the sunlight, then jerked his head in greeting.

"My man, 'Sancho Panza'," said Ricardo. "He isn't much to look at, but he's amazingly useful when he isn't sleeping. Don't try to draw him into conversation, because he cannot answer you—he lost the power of speech when he was buried in a trench at Ypres."

Sadie was all solicitude on the instant.

"He will regain it?" she asked hopefully.

"Possibly," said Ricardo, "and the first thing he'll ask for will be a candle to light him to bed."

"How did he lose his arm?" Phoebe asked.

Without the slightest affectation, Ricardo said:

"Through insisting on proving that he is British. He carried a wounded officer to safety under a heavy barrage, and he didn't keep the arm out of the way of a piece of shell."

He said no more about that. The company felt that it could make a shrewd guess at the identity of the officer who had been saved.

As a "batman" to Ricardo, "Sancho" was a treasure, but he became a pillar of strength to the crowd as a whole, for, even with only one arm, he could perform prodigious feats of labour.

From first to last, Ricardo never sought to usurp the throne of Reggie (Mussolini himself might have found the task beyond him). But he was amazingly fecund in ideas, and his sentiments—outside poetry—coincided with those of the acknowledged leader. Years of disillusionment, following the Armistice, he said, had taught him the gospel of getting money—honestly if possible, but getting it.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"My tastes are not extravagant," he told Reggie, "and when I laid my uniform aside, for the last time, I was content to take any position in civil life that grateful England was disposed to offer. It was a long time before I managed to get there before the vacancy was filled ; then, after standing six hours in a queue the fellow in front of me turned and said : 'If I don't get this job it will be the death of me.' He was my old commanding officer in the dear old days. He got the job—addressing envelopes and licking stamps. I might have become an insurance canvasser, or a footman to some lady of easy virtue, or a gigolo to some perverted old she-bear, but I took to the road. And the road has taken to me."

Between them, Reggie and Ricardo evolved an itinerary that should be pleasant and profitable. They had no false ideas about the quality of the entertainment they might be able to offer the people, but they relied upon the absurdity rather than the merits of that offering. It never occurred to them (in the beginning) that they could compete with the orthodox circus or touring company, but Ricardo uttered a truth when he said that a nigger's head thrust through a hole in a canvas sheet for intelligent whites to shy at would attract more money at a penny a throw than a Covent Garden prima donna with her songs.

And Sadie proffered the advice that it was no infringement of the moral code to exploit the conceit and vanity of the people. She had a notion that a series of County pageants would be a good line of business. She undertook to read up all the history that mattered during their sojourn in some winter camp.

And so the little company moved on through the undulating lanes of Sussex, giving a "show" here and a "show" there, and never failing to convey to the populace that they were painfully aware of their limitations as artistes and immeasurably grateful for the Act of Parliament that prohibits the carrying of fire-

THE WATER NYMPH

arms. Their performances were clean, wholesome, and old-fashioned, but there was irresistible sweetness about them and a touch of humour and humility that made appeal to the meanest rustic. (He was able to say : "They thinks they be foine actors, but I seen better'n 'em at the pitchers" : this afforded him tremendous self-satisfaction. It is an excellent idea to let a fool pay for the privilege of considering himself a cleverer fool than you. Sadie recounted for Reggie's benefit the experience of an American magazine editor who commissioned an English author to write a story in American slang. "But I don't know the slang," the author protested ; "I should use the wrong terms." "Sure," said the psychologist, "and my readers will laugh like hell at your mistakes. It's the laugh I want to give them.")

At these performances, everybody in the company assisted, even the dear Virginia whose health had undergone a miraculous change for the better. Nothing in this new mode of life had presented a handicap. It is a common fallacy among those who have never lived a nomadic life that the difficulties of observing the laws of decency are wellnigh insuperable. This is unfair to the Romany race, than whom there is no more moral community in the world. There is a type of mind that boasts of erudition and advancement, yet insists that morality is only a question of opportunity and that privilege waits on opportunity. There is an eye in the wild that is for ever blind to nudity in the light of day, not through any conscious sense of chivalry or propriety but seemingly because of indifference that may be comparable with that of the animal world. And there is an eye in the more civilized town or city that cannot pass a waxen dress model in a shop window without mentally disrobing it.

The House With the Golden Windows (and its companion 'vans) was not a modern hotel with every modern convenience, but the luxury of a bath was not

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

denied any one of the nomads. From the roof of the caravan was stretched an awning to form an extension. The bath was of canvas and collapsible and there was no mock modesty to make a travesty and a reproach of the whole business. There were days—warm summer days—when Sadie and Phoebe, often accompanied by Aunt Agatha, went down to the river to bathe. They did not encumber their bodies with veils of modesty. The trees that lined the banks or fringed the pool did not wither in disgust.

These were golden days for the Shadd Rowe Merrie England Fair. Seldom had the weather shown antipathy to the enterprise. Blue skies by day and star-shot skies by night. Little in the way of acrimony to disturb the harmony of the whole: arguments in plenty, but tact in abundance. Sometimes, but only sometimes, a morning newspaper found its way into the camp and then Reggie (or Sadie) was the first to scan it lest some paragraph should lift itself out of the page and take Sir Thomas Shadrow back into the wilderness whence he came.

"Any news?" Virginia might ask, as Reggie sat on a box with the newspaper in his hand.

"Yes, darling. Income tax looks like going up to six shillings in the pound."

"But that doesn't affect us, my boy?"

"No. Isn't it beautiful to be able to say that?"

"How's unemployment?"—from Sir Thomas.

"Two millions and a half out of work."

"And yet we won the War"—from Harold. "What's the jolly old Government doing?"

"Talking."

"Any new plays?"—from Marie the Fat.

"They're all new, nowadays. They don't get a chance to become old."

"They'll have to go back to Variety"—from Mr. Buggs.

"When I was at the top of the bill"—from Marie.

THE WATER NYMPH

"On parade!"—from Reggie. The newspaper would be carefully folded and placed away: there are a hundred uses to which a newspaper may be put and reading it comes almost at the end of the category.

Every day, wherever they might be, the members of the company rehearsed their "work" as entertainers. The merits of the combination increased amazingly. Throughout Sussex they roamed without encountering anything save Luck! Arundel, with its historic castle that hasn't its compeer in the kingdom, quaint old Chichester whose cathedral seems to encroach on the high road, Worthing, Brighton, Eastbourne. The world was kind to the wanderers. Their strength was augmented again and again, and Reggie had never to go farther afield than the high road to find his new artistes.

Before the autumn was far advanced, funds allowed of the purchase of a fairly large tent so that there was no need to rely on the charitable to provide that which alone can win the smiles of a creditor. Sadie and Reggie arrogated to themselves the post of "Treasury". They produced a statement of accounts at the end of the week and everybody appeared to be satisfied with the results. Only Marie the Fat and Mr. Buggs infringed the law of etiquette by counting heads in the tent and making an independent calculation. Marie confessed her fault and attributed the lapse to those early days when it was the custom of the company to check the figures of the theatre manager.

The winds of the heath had blown all the snobbery out of the hide of Aunt Agatha before the October had run its course. The minor performance she used to give with the "educated" Pekingese, Wung, had developed into an essential "turn", for the mysterious Ricardo provided her with a couple of fox-cubs which she put into "training" immediately. Hogan, with whom she maintained the years'-old feud, paid tribute to the gift which she appeared to possess in the controlling of animals and made a tentative offer to get her

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

a panther and a couple of man-eating tigers. She rather suspected an ulterior motive and thanked him with a look that left him panting.

Happy days ! Happy nights ! And romance creeping furtively on tip-toe to peep through the opening in the tent or through the doorway of *The House With the Golden Windows*.

Ricardo strolled down to the fringe of the pool, where she had been bathing alone. She had just slipped into the dark blue overall, but her feet and legs were bare and gleamed, white and satiny, in the morning sunlight. The wet towel lay across her arm ; her hair had not dried though she had rubbed it briskly—it surrounded her small head like an aura. She halted in the path and raised her gaze half-timorously, half-hopefully. He rested an elbow against the trunk of a gnarled oak and the hand supported his well-shaped head.

“It wasn’t my intention to encroach on your privacy, Phoebe,” he said, and his voice was pitched in a low and musical key. “I hoped that I might meet you—just like this—and walk back with you.”

“Perhaps I hoped, too,” she said, and her cheeks showed crimson because of the boldness.

He looked down at her white feet with their coral pink toe-nails.

“No shoes ! Tread on a pine needle, and you may never dance again.”

“Dance ? Where, Ricardo ? I’ve left all that behind.”

“Do you never regret, Phoebe ?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“But you were a child of your generation before you took to the road ? I have gathered that much from your brothers and the little American lady. I should have said that you would be the last to take easily to the life of a nomad. Lift your head ; I want to look into your eyes.”

THE WATER NYMPH

"You are so tall, Ricardo. I should have to stand on something to bring my eyes level with yours."

He stooped and grasped her waist with both hands. Her waist was gloriously soft and pliable and the touch of his hands heated her young blood so that she wanted to cry out in an ecstasy. With the prodigious strength that was his, he lifted her so that their eyes were level. If he looked in hers for the woman that might surrender to swift desire, he looked in vain. It was the child he saw there. The years of wasted adolescence—a dance here, a theatre there, a senseless motor-race along the country roads, a casual flirtation, a mocking of romance—these years had been eliminated from her life: they might never have been. Whence had fled the slangy, vapouring flapper, jaded, bored, and wholly surfeited young woman who had come to believe that it was the duty of every male acquaintance to "give her a good time"?

Ricardo set her down again and let his arms fall by his sides. A faint, almost imperceptible flush showed through the tan of his cheeks. All the magical beauty of young womanhood was there, but the surrender in her eyes was the surrender of a child. Hot desire was cooled by the very flames that fed it, just as fire fades under the greater flame of sunshine.

"I feel that I am no more than a child now," she said, replying to his remark. "There is so much to learn, so much that never came into my life before all this happened."

He merely nodded as though his thoughts were louder than her voice and made it difficult for him to hear above them.

A stoat moved slowly, sinuously, through the undergrowth of blackberry and thorn. Ricardo watched it from the corner of his eye until it disappeared.

"This life is good to you, Phoebe? You feel that you are living?"

The neck of the simple overall was wide open. The rich glow of her throat and bosom, following the swim

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

and the vigorous drying, awakened desire anew. The small hillocks, only partially concealed by the fabric, were heaving and falling. He lifted his gaze: the red lips were parted—moist, trembling lips.

"It might not have been so good in my eyes, Ricardo, if you had not joined us."

"Have I made so much difference?"

"So much—and more."

"From the trapeze last night I saw you looking at me and I fancied that you were frightened," he said.

"I am always nervous until you are safely through, Ricardo."

"Dear child, it is a very simple act—an amateur's act."

"My imagination makes it terrible in its possibilities."

"Phoebe, I believe that you love me?"

"Why, of course, Ricardo. I love you very, very dearly."

In the undergrowth a rabbit squealed and was still. Ricardo gazed at the spot where he had seen the stoat move a few moments earlier. When he looked again at Phoebe there was a deep, thoughtful expression in his eyes.

"We had better get back to the camp," he said with brusqueness that brought a shadow to her face. He glanced at her bare feet. "Those pine needles!" he said, warningly. Then he picked her up in his arms as easily as he would have picked up a child and carried her up the winding path to the field where the grass was soft and sympathetic to the tread.

From a distance of forty yards, Sir Thomas Shadrow watched the pair until they reached the confines of the camp. He breathed heavily, labouredly; his forehead was damp with the sweat of paternal fear.

CHAPTER XVII

A GIANT IN KNEE BREECHES

FOR an hour and longer the little aristocratic nomad walked about the camp nursing his fears, forebodings and ludicrous conception of dignity. The earth didn't shake nor the leaves fall from the trees.

It wasn't to be expected that a few months of the simple life would be sufficient to flush the stagnant drains of his mind: if that were a certain remedy for constipated brains, some universal reformer with unassailable authority would issue an edict that half the population must take to the open country immediately.

Sir Thomas—let it be emphasized—was a small man with a small head, and most of the cells under his hat were moribund when he set out on the great adventure of finding food without expecting it to be given to him. The one cell that kept itself lively was that which contained his idea of his own importance as the successor to a title. Why that title was bestowed he had no clear knowledge, but it was enough for him that Debrett mentioned the succession: the rest of the world ought to be sufficiently intelligent to take it for granted that the first baronet did something that was uncommonly good for the State.

Poverty might make Sir Thomas sentimental on occasion; self-pity might make him moody and resigned to all that Fate might have in store for him; but that touch of innate conceit could develop into a devastating whirlwind and sweep away all the more human attributes of the man.

During that hour of bitter pondering, he observed Phoebe in the near distance on two or three occasions. She was moving about her several tasks with a curiously

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

submissive mien. Not till now had he marked the change that had come over her since they left Highfield Court. Before the crash came to topple the family fortunes over the precipice, he was rather afraid of Phoebe—she was so modern, so forceful of character, so unlike those Mid-Victorian damsels that it was the privilege of his age to hold up as models of propriety and filial devotedness. He had never found the courage to assert his authority in his own house. Why? Because if he dared to speak deprecatingly of the liberties she took—the late hours, the cocktails, the escapades with male companions, and the hideous prostituting of the English language—she might give him one of those pitying looks he dreaded so much, and make caustic references to “old-fashioned beans”, or some other variety of human vegetable.

He had allowed his individuality to be overwhelmed, but in private he had said to himself that the greatest joy the gods might give him would be a sweet, unsophisticated daughter modelled on the pattern of his mother or grandmother.

The metamorphosis had been brought about in circumstances of which he hadn't dreamed in the old days. The greatest joy had been given him. The effect on his mind was probably natural, but wholly contrary to what (say) Virginia would have expected. Conceit became a bully. Conceit said to him: “All the old defiance of Phoebe was a pretence. I thought I had an Amazon to deal with: she is a shrinking piece of timidity. She is conscious of my superior strength of mind. Now she shall see that my passive acceptance of her ill-manners and modern arrogance was only a mask for the strength that lay behind.”

He did not speak to Phoebe herself about this clandestine love affair. He went to Lady Shadrow.

All small men with one-cell brains and a grievance that urges them to bite pieces out of the world, begin the bloody feud by sharpening their teeth on their wife.

A GIANT IN KNEE BREECHES

They are strengthened in essaying this dastardly task by the subconscious knowledge that the wife will be overawed by her marriage vows and refrain from biting in turn. This marks the first stage of the great victory—it seems to justify the fury as a whole.

There is nothing quite so pathetic in life as the rage of a small man who has to stand on a chair to make his fury felt. Ajax, who defied the lightning, left a lot of half-witted little children. They became Sir Thomas Shadrows.

In the privacy of the caravan, with door and windows shut so that none might be privy to the battle, Sir "Tom" faced the sweet-tempered Virginia and unfolded his story. That which he had seen in the plantation had dissipated all the newly-found hopes that had come to him in the hour of trial.

Was it not true of him that with the courage of his ancestors he had faced disaster (but not defeat), bared his head to the storm of vicissitude and endeavoured to show all of them that poverty might cripple his pocket but not his pride—pride in his family history, pride in his name, pride in that glorious galaxy of Shadrows whose name could be traced through the ages?

He that filched his purse might find nothing in it save a moth; he that brought his good name into disrepute made him so poor that all the misery visited on him seemed to be deserved.

"And this is the daughter you have always defended against my strictures on her thoughtless conduct."

Lady Shadrow moved back her wicker chair in order to give him more room in which to wave his arms and feet. The floor of a caravan is no fit platform for a Cicero with mustard on his tongue.

"That girl has taken advantage of the humiliating circumstances in which misfortune has placed me. Secretly, slyly, she has been indulging her base passions. She has said to herself: 'My parents have sunk so low, and they have brought me so low, that if I descend to

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

the degrading level of a paramour they have only themselves to blame.' ”

Here, Lady Shadrow murmured that early that morning she had heard a thrush singing more sweetly than any bird she had ever heard before.

“Thrush ! Thrush !” he retorted. “You can speak of a singing thrush, when you must know that through my brain a tempest is booming. I am talking about your child, Virginia.”

“And yours, my dear,” she said quietly.

“She is the mistress of this vagabond.”

“Try to be calm, my dear,” Virginia counselled.

“How can I remain calm ? It appals me to see you sitting there and accepting this horrible, this damnable evidence of her immorality as though it were no more than might have been expected.”

“Phoebe is my daughter—and yours, my dear,” said Virginia, “and I believe in her just as I believe in—in you.”

He snapped his fingers—snapped off the heads of two imaginary foes.

“Platitude, platitude ! This man—who is he ? A strolling player, a rogue and a vagabond, according to the law of a dead king. We gave him sanctuary from the storm of adversity——”

“My dear ! How wonderfully you talk. I wouldn't have believed that you had so marvellous a command of language.”

“Don't scoff, Virginia.”

“I love you too dearly to scoff, Thomas.”

“My heart is rent.”

“Darling, forgive me. Frankly, when you began, and as you went on, I was saying to myself : ‘How wonderful ! He is going to show Reggie and Marie and all of them that he is a greater actor than any in the company’.”

“Virginia, I realize that it is hopeless to try to convince you of the enormity of that girl's offence. Ricardo must go. That is final.”

A GIANT IN KNEE BREECHES

"I rather like Mr. Ricardo, Thomas."

"Virginia, suffering has affected your brain. Is it possible that you have forgotten the illustrious name that I gave you?"

"No, Thomas, you are just my husband—my very dear and lovable husband, and I say to myself, every minute of the day: 'How wonderful he has behaved in the face of misfortune.' There, in the words of dear Sadie, 'shall we call it a day?'"

"Crazy, crazy," he shouted. "I ought to have known that you couldn't appreciate what this means. The man is a mountebank, a gipsy, a romancer. He is a beggar."

"Are not we all of us beggars, Thomas?"

"No, by God!"

"My dear!"

"I am Sir Thomas Shadrow, Baronet, proud of his line, proud of his country, proud of his king. Let no man—er—let no man— You know what I mean?"

"*Nemo me impune lacesset*," said Virginia with infinite tenderness. Her smile would have disarmed a rent-collector working on a commission basis.

"Exact-ly," said he. "I am Sir Thomas Shadrow, Baronet, and all the misfortunes that Fate may hurl at me shall not take away my pride in my name and country." He pulled open the door of the caravan, shook his fist at the vision of an armed gladiator charging down on him from the skies, misjudged the distance of the top step and turned a remarkably clever somersault down the others.

Reggie, rushing past the caravan at that moment, picked him up and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Topping, pater," said Reggie, breathlessly. "Do that fall in the ring and up goes your salary. Listen. Quick. There's a guy with a hook nose and a hungry eye. He's looking for you. It's either a writ or an income-tax demand. Beat it!"

Reggie raced on, leaving the little man blinking in the sunlight and wiping a blade of grass from his lips.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Around the end of the caravan came a smartly-dressed man with a couple of long envelopes in his hand. He grabbed the loyalist by the shoulder.

"Have I the honour of addressing Sir Thomas Shadrow?" he asked.

"Have you hell," said Sir Thomas.

"Oh—h! Sure?"

"Sure!"—fiercely. "Do you think I don't know my own name?"

"You don't know Sir Thomas Shadrow?"

"And don't want to know. Quit!"

"But I've been trailing him for weeks and weeks."

"Well, get your nose down to the ground again and trail some more."

"Damn that fellow Shadrow."

"Damn him from here to Iceland if you like, but quit," said Sir Thomas.

"Yes, I damn him all right. That fellow's a human flea. He hops like one. Just when you think you've got him down one leg—whiff!—he's up the other."

"Get away from this camp," said Sir Thomas, proud of his line, his country, his loyalty. Those tax papers in the man's hand seemed to become larger and larger.

"Get away—quickly. And—keep this to yourself—don't stop running till you reach a disinfecting station. *There's fever in the camp!*"

The fellow went so quickly that a following wind couldn't have caught up with him.

And he telephoned later to the London agents, regretting that it seemed impossible to advise Sir Thomas Shadrow that he was in clover instead of standing in a field of thistles.

Lady Shadrow's solicitude for Phoebe was more sincere than that of Sir Thomas, though not quite so spectacular. When they were alone together, she took her daughter's hand between her two, and said, very tenderly :

A GIANT IN KNEE BREECHES

"It seems as though it were only yesterday that the nurse put you into my arms for the first time and said: 'Here is happiness that all the gold in the world couldn't purchase. Give it all the love you have in your heart because she will be with you for only a little while.' She meant that soon you would grow up and someone would steal away your heart."

"Never from you, mother," said Phoebe, softly.

"When you hear the call—the right call, darling—no other voice will be able to dissuade you. It wouldn't be natural."

"Life seems very unreal to me just now," Phoebe said. "Everything has changed—everything and everybody, save you."

"I have watched you changing, my darling, and I haven't been altogether displeased," said Lady Shadrow.

"It has surprised you, mother?"

"Yes, and no," said Lady Shadrow. "I knew in the old days, as we call them, though it isn't a year ago, that you hadn't made the great discovery—that without deep and sincere love life is very much like a wasted task."

"To-day, it's all different. I was going to tell you, mother, but I wasn't certain myself until Ricardo spoke to me."

Lady Shadrow was still smoothing the girl's hand. Something suspiciously like tears caused her eyes to glisten.

"How carefully you used to attend to your hands," she said.

"They are dreadfully rough now—red and coarse," said Phoebe.

"They are still very beautiful to me," said Lady Shadrow. A moment of silence, then: "When first did you know that you loved Mr. Ricardo?"

"The first time he looked at me," said Phoebe.

"Have you told him your real name?"

"No, I haven't felt the necessity."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"And he has told you nothing of his antecedents?"

"Nothing."

"He might be—anybody?"

"If he were a common thief it would make no difference to my feelings."

Lady Shadrow closed her eyes for a second.

"If he took your love from me he would be worse than a common thief," she said. "Always give me your confidence, Phoebe. Come straight to me the instant you fear your happiness is being threatened—the instant you are not certain of yourself."

"I suppose father will resent it, but I don't seem to care what he may think."

"And in saying that, darling, you rather soil the love you give me," said Lady Shadrow. "Try to understand all that your father has suffered. It isn't as though he were a young man and able to begin all over again with the strength and courage of youth. He had his dreams about your future: we shall never be able to imagine all the pain it must have given him to see those dreams dispelled."

Lady Shadrow spoke to Ricardo on the subject. Without preamble she said to him:

"Mr. Ricardo, Phoebe is my only daughter and my youngest child. If ever you should be given a daughter I hope that you will know the joy a daughter has meant to me. It is something very beautiful and sacred and something you know may soon be taken from you—something you give back to the world, trusting, praying that the world will not bruise it."

And Ricardo, faithful to the grandiose manner that was characteristic of him, removed his wide-brimmed felt hat, bowed low, and murmured gallantly:

"My lady!"

Well, well, well! If somebody didn't infuse a little of despised poetry into this life, wouldn't it be a slave's task to greet the morning sun?

CHAPTER XVIII

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE'S FIRE

THE weather was beginning to show signs of breaking up.

Ever since the Phoenicians first sailed up the River Thames to trade coloured beads for the tin mines of the Ancient Britons, there has been a steady stream of invective directed at the English weather. Every foreigner knows that it is always raining in Manchester, and that London is invariably hidden in a dense fog. The locals are not aware of this truth, but they know the value of advertisement and let the lie take its chance. Only a very few intensely loyal Britons sing the praises of English weather: they are poets and live in Italy.

This particular summer had been so glorious that it prompted the irreverent Reggie to give thanks to the meteorological department for tempering the winds to the shorn Shadrows. And the radio broadcaster had been too busy with running commentaries on croquet matches and centipede races to mention any of those deep depressions that slither down from Iceland on the eve of every Bank Holiday.

Reggie had not overlooked the fact that winter remains in the calendar, however distressing it may be to the indigent. Although the "treasury" showed a satisfying reserve fund by this time, it wasn't considered prudent to hibernate till the spring should come.

During their travels, Reggie, Sadie, and Harold had shown commendable business acumen in making a careful and systematic note of small towns, populations, and halls that might be available to just such a combination of talent as theirs during the winter months.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

The proposal was that Sir Thomas and Lady Shadrow should go into winter quarters while the remainder of the company toured in the caravans.

The conference at which this decision was arrived at comprised only Sadie, Reggie, Harold, and Phoebe. For a reason that was made known later Reggie had been less disposed of late to take Ricardo into his confidences. His father hadn't said anything to him about the "scandalous incident in the wood", but the aloofness, dignified and tolerable, was there. Perhaps he feared the possibility of that which had already happened.

Harold, the erudite, was becoming remarkably prolific in ideas these days: he was rapidly improving his average by having slightly less than five per cent. favourably considered at the weekly gathering of the "executive". When they appealed to him on the question of winter quarters that should make the parents feel that they were still in the centre of things, yet resting and sheltering from the inseparable turmoil of life on the road, he remembered the woods in which they had rested for lunch the first day they travelled forth from the old homestead. Than Ifield Woods he could think of no more beautiful setting in all Sussex.

"There's Farmer's Hill," he said. "We'll get permission to shove the jolly old hutch in the copse there. Why, if the pater climbs a tree that's high enough he will be able to see Horsham and old Highfield Court from that point. Let me describe the place."

"No, thank you," said Reggie, rather too quickly to be polite. "I have it in mind—used to go there as a boy. If we leave it to you to describe we'll learn nothing but the history of the whole dam' county."

"The history of Sussex," said Harold languidly, "is really the history of the nation."

Sadie, who was collecting material for the book she intended to write, nodded encouragingly, but Reggie was not to be thwarted.

"Sadie," he said, bluntly, "the history of any English

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE . . .

village can be summed up in this way: The Church, the pub, and the village idiot."

Harold yawned: he had been through a trying day, thinking out new ideas for the following season and keeping peace between Marie the Fat and Mr. Buggs, both of whom had developed signs of "high hat" since a more or less successful performance in Pullborough.

"English history," he said, still in a languid key, "is soundly based on her sea-power. Reggie may tell you that it is founded on clowning and smuggling, but he's prejudiced. He lives for the present and has no soul for the past." He broke off to ask Reggie to roll him a cigarette. "All around you there is downland and meadow and woods, but this county had its iron age, and the Navy depended on the ordnance of the wealden ironmasters. On this common where we are camped, they might have made cannon a thousand years ago." He spread his fingers over his mouth to hide the yawn. "Excellent cannon, too, I believe," he said. "Cylinders fixed on sledges and, like the staves of a cask, held together by iron bands."

"Save all this for the next village idiot," said Reggie. "What's the use of yarning about Yesterday?"

"Because we may all go back to it," said Harold quietly. "It may all happen again in two thousand years."

"Well, we'll save it till then. Now, let's get down to the 'eats'. We have settled the pater and the mater in Ifield Woods—Farmer's Hill to be exact. Where do we trek?"

"I thought you had decided that," said Harold wearily.

"To begin with—do you stay with the old caravan on Farmer's Hill?"

"How absurd," said Harold. "How could you get along without me?"

"Good!" said Reggie. "I thought you were slacking a trifle in your enthusiasm. Ever since you ran the

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

boxing booth you've shown a tendency to fall asleep on the slightest provocation."

Harold thoughtfully rubbed his chin.

"Wasn't it in Steynning where that lop-eared brute of a barber pole-axed me with his fist?" he asked.

"It cost the company a fiver," said Reggie, sighing. "I remember that. I put up the 'purse' inviting the local lads to try their skill with the gloves. You were satisfied that you'd learned something more useful than Latin at college—imagined that Jack Dempsey must have picked up most of his wrinkles from watching you box. Oh, boy, that was a lovely wallop the kid gave you. It made me feel dizzy."

"Thank you," said Harold without the slightest trace of resentment.

Sadie got up and deliberately kissed the spot on his chin where the blow had fallen.

"It made me cry when I heard of it," she said sympathetically. "I was so glad that it wasn't Reggie."

"Thanks, again," said Harold. He turned to Phoebe who had remained strangely silent during the last ten minutes. "Well, little sister," he said, "what's percolating through the jolly old grey matter? Why so pensive?"

"I was wondering what might happen during the winter," Phoebe said. "Where do we go? And what do we do when we get there?"

"You go to Farmer's Hill," said Reggie authoritatively, and all the boyish lightness was gone from his voice and manner.

Phoebe made no reply. There was an expression of intense sadness in her eyes.

Harold wagged a long thin finger at his brother.

"We have made a good deal of money, Reggie, old crook," he said, "and I insist that this local pageant idea of mine is a goldmine that awaits us if we apply our mind to the business. Sadie and I have been reading up the history of the different towns and villages in the

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE . . .

county, and I don't see why we shouldn't add a little to it by way of interest."

"Sadie is keen on it," said Reggie, "and what goes for her goes for me. Buggs and Marie should prove worth their place in the bill: they've been thundering good scouts."

"Ricardo should make an excellent leading man," said Harold. "That fellow gets more like Henry Irving every day."

Phoebe's thoughts had drifted along another channel but the colour came to her cheeks as she heard mention of Ricardo.

Reggie was watching her intently as he said:

"I'm not certain that Ricardo will be with us much longer."

There was embarrassing silence.

Sadie looked down at the ground.

Harold said: "Re-ally!" as though he had already lost the thread of the conversation.

The effect of the statement on Phoebe was startling. She jumped to her feet. Her hands were clenched tightly. Her eyes were full of a fire the others had not seen in them before.

"Why?" she asked. And, again, "Why?"

Reggie gave his sister a long, steady look. He said, very quietly, and as though he knew of a great many other reasons:

"It may not be Ricardo's wish to remain with us."

She opened her lips to speak, but it was a long while before she could frame her words. Then, they rushed out fiercely, incoherently:

"It's a plot. It's something—there's something going on behind his back. It isn't fair. You're all against him. Why? Why?" The tears of anger gushed forth.

Sadie went to her and rested her hands on her shoulders.

"Dear Phoebe," she said gently, "don't talk like

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

that. We are all very grateful to Mr. Ricardo for what he has done for the party. He has been a reg'lar feller as we say out yonder. It isn't for Reggie or me or anyone to compel him to stay if he wishes to go."

Phoebe threw off the restraining hands.

"I don't believe you," she burst out. "You're doing something that isn't square. He doesn't wish to go. I know he doesn't. He would have told me if he wished to go."

Reggie looked around him to make certain they might not be overheard by others in the camp.

"Listen to me, Phoebe," he said, and the affectionate brother had taken the place of the jester. "Nothing that isn't fair and square and honest would go with any of us. I've had a talk to Ricardo about things in general. We understand each other, I think. He has been a real help during the time he has been with us, and I give him credit for all he has done. But if it is his wish to clear out and start a similar show of his own in the Midlands or in the West Country, it isn't for us to prevent him."

Phoebe was looking past him. There was an expression of doubt on her face.

"Does he wish to go?" she asked, and answered herself with a negative shake of the head. "He is so happy here: he told me so."

"Why should he tell you any more than he tells me?" Reggie asked, ignoring the warning glance that Sadie shot at him.

"I don't know," said Phoebe lamely, and her cheeks betrayed her embarrassment.

"He knows that I am the head of this little crowd," said Reggie. "And he knows, too, that I wouldn't stand any whisperings behind my back. No arguments or grievances. Out with it—that's the idea. We must work together or not at all. Each for all and all for each."

"Good lad! Good lad!" said Harold, appraising

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE . . .

the sentiment. "It sounds dangerously like communism, but . . . well, good lad!"

Reggie kept his gaze fixed on his sister.

"Nobody in this company of artistes must think the others are dwelling on a lower plane. You know what I mean by that?"

Harold blinked a little and gave him a steady scrutiny.

"I say, old boy, do you include me among the artistes?"

"I suppose I must," said Reggie, curtly.

"Thanks, awfully. I fancy I heard one of the 'comrades' refer to me as a—as a worm—a tape-worm, to be exact."

"I'm not here to listen to complaints, Harold," said Reggie. "I'm in the mood for business."

"Oh, righto, boy! I don't mind anybody calling me a tape-worm, but as you're a blood relation I'm wondering if it is quite respectful to the head of the show. However——"

Marie the Fat and Clarence Brough Fitzherbert came out of their caravan, which was so placed that it could not be seen by the conference as two other vans formed a barrier. There was a third person with them. Professional jealousy was menacing the truth of Reggie's statement about each for all and all for each. Marie was speaking:

"You hold his lug, Clarence, and I'll make him hear."

Harold looked around the corner of the caravan.

"They're putting 'Sancho Panza' through the third degree," he said, casually. "Have we any other business to transact?"

Sadie shook her head.

"Listen to the music," she said: "it'll change the trend of thought."

Marie and Mr. Buggs had waylaid the human curiosity, "Sancho Panza", the dumb, one-armed manservant of Ricardo. They had backed him up against a wheel of a caravan, cutting off his retreat.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Look here, Hookey," Marie said, wholly ignorant of the near presence of the others, "I admire your loyalty, but I pity you your ignorance. What do you know about *the* profession? Shake your head or nod and I'll understand. But no lip! Clarence here will not allow anybody to give me lip. Will you, Clarence?"

"May heaven defend the nitwit who doth essay the impertinence," said Clarence.

Marie shouted irritably:

"Tell him in good plain backstage stuff, *Buggs*!"

Clarence obeyed. Marie went on:

"It's the way you hang about when Ricardo's doing his stuff," said Marie to "Sancho". "I don't like it. Hear that? (Shout in his ear, Clarence. Say I won't stand for it.) You give him a 'hand' even if his turn's dud. You seem to think he's the whole dam' show. He ain't. Is he, Clarence?"

"We took him in out of pity," said Clarence.

"Look at me, Hookey," Marie commanded. "I may have a hole in my purse to-day, but it isn't long ago I was signing autographs for the fans. Was I signing autographs for 'em at the stage door, Clarence?"

"Thousands of them," said Clarence.

"Top of the bill, I was. Picking up my hundred a week, and spending it. Was I picking up a hundred a week, Clarence?"

"You were," said Clarence. "And spending it."

"Well, wasn't it my own money? Why shouldn't I spend it?"

"I passed no comment, my dear," said Clarence.

"No, but your thoughts are so dam' noisy," said Marie. "I might have saved a pile if I hadn't been so soft-hearted and staked every scrounger that happened to come along and bite my ear. Yes, Hookey, a hundred a week! Did your boss—did Italiano, Icecreamo, ever touch a hundred without the help of a barrel organ and a monkey? Not in your life! And yet he has the impertinence to want his name shoved up in big letters on the

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE . . .

bills. Why? Why? Does he think he's the draw? Is he all that matters to the box-office? Who is he? Clarence, do you know who he is?"

"A mystery, my dear—a mystery," said Clarence.

"Am I the woman to have a mystery billed above me?"

"Not likely, my dear," said Clarence.

"Very well, then! Now, Hookey, slide along to your master and intimate—that's the word, isn't it, Clarence?"

"The very word, my dear."

"Intimate that his 'side' don't cut any ice with me. Tell him that if he ever gets to the top of the bill, the bill will be a special one sent out by the police. There you are! I've told him off, and I feel all the better for it. You may not have heard all I've said, but some of it's trickled into your dome. And that being that, all the best to you. S'long!"

Marie and Clarence left him and came around the corner into full view. They didn't appear to be startled when they stumbled on the conference. Marie smiled graciously.

"Isn't it a heavenly day?" she said.

The two sat down as calmly as though they were taking their seats as "dead-heads" in a theatre.

Sadie fancied she saw a dangerous glint in Reggie's eye.

"Marie," she said, quickly, "we've just worked out a real novelty in the way of billing. Now, tell me if it isn't the cutest idea that ever came out of the States. We're going to take a hint from a li'le ol' king of yours, Arthur—wasn't it?—who had a round table made so's the knights couldn't squabble about who should sit at the top."

Clarence opened his lips to speak. Marie said, firmly: "Buggs!"

He sat back and thoughtfully rubbed his long chin.

"My dear," said Marie to Sadie, "the billing of a show has never really interested me. Once you've been

at the top you get the feeling there's nowhere else to go, so what's the odds?"

"How splendidly generous of you," said Sadie. "We thought of having the names of the artistes set out in a circle. It would look mightily attractive, and we wondered what you would think of it."

"It's a cute idea," said Marie, wholeheartedly. "Nobody would be at the top—would they?"

"In a way—no," Sadie conceded.

"But there'd still be the centre of the circle," said Marie. "Put me in the centre and I don't care who's at the top or the bottom."

Harold rose from his place and went for a walk. He made a mental note: Marie, he thought, could make a circle around the whole crowd of them when it came to quick thinking.

Ricardo came across the clearing on his way to his caravan. Politely, he raised his hat as he passed the group. From the manner in which he looked back at them he might have suspected that he was the subject of their conversation. Phoebe half-rose, but Sadie grasped her by the hand.

"Come and help me choose a new song for the next show," she said.

Phoebe shook her head slowly and stared after Ricardo.

Reggie rose and followed the athlete.

"They're going to quarrel," said Phoebe fearfully.

"Dear Phoebe," said Sadie reassuringly, "my Reggie wouldn't quarrel with a tax collector. They're going to talk about some new business Mr. Ricardo is putting into his turn."

CHAPTER XIX

CHALLENGE !

REGGIE halted at the foot of the caravan steps. Ricardo, within, had pretended not to notice that he was being followed.

"How are things, Ricardo?"

"Come in," said Ricardo and held open the half-door.

It was the first time that anyone other than "Sancho Panza" had been invited into that caravan.

Reggie went up the steps rather diffidently. He told Sadie afterwards that in at least some respects Ricardo was the only real artiste in the troupe. The interior of the caravan was a picture of good taste; every colour harmonized with the rest of the embellishment; even the fresh wild flowers gathered that day had been chosen with delicacy of thought and arranged as only an artist might have arranged them. The tiny apartment was lined with maple wood; the cupboards and drawers were most cunningly contrived. The volumes that lined the shelves of the tiny bookcase near the bunk were the class of book that appeals only to the higher intellect.

"I thought we'd better have a last word," said Reggie, accepting the chair that Ricardo placed in position for him.

"Smoke?" Ricardo handed him a box of cigars. He did it without the slightest sign of affectation, as though it were not unusual for him to stock cigars. "Not a last word," he said, and smiled in friendliness. "I am one of those men who make few acquaintances. Therefore, I do not care to lose them easily."

"I'm not too happy about your going," said Reggie, "but we're men, I hope, and can look a difficult situation

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

in the face without feeling funk. I've given the others the hint that you're leaving us with the intention of forming a company of your own."

"Anything more than a hint?" asked Ricardo. He knew that Reggie wanted to talk to him about Phoebe.

"There wasn't anything more to say—was there?"

"It was a matter entirely for yourself," said Ricardo. "I've enjoyed every minute of my stay with you."

"We've enjoyed your company," said Reggie and he wasn't feeling very comfortable.

Ricardo lit a cigar: Reggie was still holding his between finger and thumb: it might have represented a sop to him.

"You have been wonderfully kind to me," said Ricardo. He spoke briskly and in the manner of a man who knows his strength to an ounce.

"We took you on trust, of course."

"As I took you," said Ricardo.

Now they were getting near the firing-line. No patronizing, please.

"We accepted you as—as a gentleman," said Reggie.

"I hope that I have not proved myself otherwise."

"I've said it already—you have done some excellent work for us. After all, we are a simple crowd. That's rather a crude way of putting it. We're neither artistes nor gipsies. To be quite frank, we were rather low in funds when you came along."

"I took it for granted in the beginning," said Ricardo, "that you were like myself—anxious to earn the food that keeps one alive. I should say that you have achieved wonders since you set out on this adventure, if I may so call it."

"We have found everybody exceedingly kind, even generous towards us," said Reggie. "We know that the old country is in a pretty sick and sorry state and that there isn't much money lying around loose."

"Without being unctuous," said Ricardo, "I should say that one of these days you will be running a first-

CHALLENGE!

class combination. You have a happy talent for organizing, and the little lady from the States appears to be admirably placed in her position. I have a very high opinion of that young lady."

"We will leave her out of it," said Reggie, coldly, and a hard look came into his eyes.

"I may say that I admire her courage, I suppose," said Ricardo.

"She might not be appreciative of the compliment," said Reggie.

"I was thinking," said Ricardo—he smiled at a vision that might have been looking at him through the window of the caravan—"I was thinking that she had more courage than you, for instance."

That was the challenge Reggie needed. The cigar snapped under the pressure of his fingers.

"Put your cards on the table," said he. "If it's a bluff you want me to call, I'll call it."

"Splendid," said Ricardo. "The little lady wouldn't have come here and wasted so much of my time in talking aimlessly. She would have said with directness what she came to say."

"About Phoebe—about my sister?"

Ricardo inclined his head.

"You are aware that I have a very real and affectionate regard for her," he said, gallantly.

"You are much older than she."

"That is not what is operating in your mind," said Ricardo. "I am not more than thirty—what is the matter of ten years' difference between our ages?"

"You have no idea who she really is, any more than we know who you are?"

"It would make no difference to my regard for her if she were princess or pauper."

"I was afraid you were going to swing in that sort of dope," said Reggie. "It doesn't go with me."

"And that coarseness of expression doesn't seem to be quite fair to you, either," said Ricardo.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Do you think it was the action of a gentleman . . . I suppose you call yourself a gentleman? . . . to make love to a young girl secretly."

"I have yet to learn that one should make it publicly," said Ricardo.

"We don't know who you are."

"And I haven't even taken the trouble to ask for your credentials."

"There's been too much mystery about you."

"Perhaps there has been a little too much inquisitiveness on the part of others."

"You may be a thief, for all we know."

"Or even a baronet," said Ricardo, slowly.

Reggie wasn't certain that his man hadn't hit on that accidentally.

"I don't care what you are," he said, "so long as you play the man."

"Am I not playing the man by agreeing to take my leave without so much as a protest against . . . well, a little unfairness?"

"When are you moving out?"

"To-night, when the moon sinks." He laughed after the manner of a philanderer being dismissed by an irate parent. "The moon casts shadows," he said, "and I'm rather nervous of shadows."

Reggie merely nodded; he couldn't find the right words to say. He rose from the chair.

"I'd like to have a last word with you," he said awkwardly. "When you are ready to move out I'll come back to say good-bye."

"Thank you," said Ricardo.

Reggie went back to Sadie who was working out the pay sheet.

"Where's Phoebe?" he asked suspiciously.

"With her mother," said Sadie. "Well?"

"He goes to-night," said Reggie.

"How did he take it?"

"He had me guessing, Sadie. He's a mystery. There's

CHALLENGE!

nothing to be gained by wishing he hadn't fallen in with us."

"And nothing to be gained by falling out with him," said Sadie. "It's true he's a mystery, but what are we?"

"Have you seen inside his caravan?"

"I hate snooping, boy."

"It amazed me," said Reggie. "He's artistic all right. And smokes cigars! What do you think of that?"

"Depends on the smell of the cigar. I've seen niggers smoke them."

"He's a superior kind of fellow."

"So are you, honey, when you keep that temper under control. Did you mention Phoebe?"

"Naturally. I warned him."

"Did you warn that fellow Carter when he first came along?"

"How absurd, Sadie! Carter comes of an awfully good family."

"He certainly behaved like a gentleman," she said.

"You've changed your tone," said Reggie, petulantly. "You were all for having an understanding with Ricardo."

"I left it to you. Had to. If you've made a mess of it, I suppose the blame will come back to me automatically. Did you talk to him about 'good families' and that sort of boloney?"

"I gave him to understand that he wasn't monkeying with commoners. At least, I think he gathered that."

"Poor sap! Did you wait for the change?"

"What change?"

"Didn't he counter with a reference to you and me?"

"What are you vapouring about?"

"You were preaching him a little sermon on morality—weren't you?" said Sadie. "You were telling him that this was no place in which to open a free love colony?"

"What are you saying?"

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"I'm trying to figure out what he may be thinking."

"About you and me. Eh?"

"And your hypocrisy, Bonehead."

"But, *we* know, Sadie!"

"If he doesn't, he's justified in forming an opinion. Go on! What a diplomat your country lost when it let you drift into the hot-dog profession! Ricardo's in love with Phoebe? Is he going to take her with him when he streaks out to-night?"

"Look here, Sadie, you're the most difficult person in the world to understand. There can be no doubt that Ricardo is a downright crook."

"He looks like a murderer."

"There's a mystery about him."

"Mebbe he's a two-gun man!"

"Obviously, he's educated, and that makes it all the more suspicious, Sadie."

"Sure, honey. It's a helluva lucky thing he didn't bring his diplomas along and hang 'em in his caravan. We'd have had him in the electric chair in two shakes."

"Why are you guying me, Sadie?"

"I'm cheering you same as I'd cheer any clown who was doing his best in the ring. Couldn't you have tried to play the gentleman?"

"I suspect him."

"That's half an Englishman's profession—suspecting," said Sadie. "Not monkeying with commoners! How do you pull that stuff?"

"You know what I mean, Sadie?"

"You bet I do. I've got the right line on you. Ricardo could do what he liked in a camp of honest, simple folk, but let him tread on tiptoe when he's in the presence of a real live baronet who isn't worth ten cents, and is cursed with a sap of a son."

"Oh, ghee, Sadie, you're 'mad' with me!"

"Why didn't you speak like a cave man to the Carter guy when he flung Phoebe aside?"

"Why behave like this, Sadie?"

CHALLENGE!

"You didn't dare stand up to Carter. You were hoping the family of Shadrow would get a 'break' before long, come into the Big Money, and be able to creep back among the snobs you profess to despise."

"That's a lie, Sadie, and you know it."

"And there's your Lady Muriel Cratton, or Pratton, or Fratton they'd fixed up for you to sponge on. I suppose you'll be sneaking back to her before long?"

"Don't be absurd, Sadie!"

"Absurd yourself," said Sadie. "I've wasted a heap of time studying men ever since I was kissed by one who meant it."

"Lady Muriel has passed clean out of my mind."

"Sez you! Men never allow an old flame, even a wife, to drop clean out of their existence. They may jilt them, separate, divorce them, or get divorced, but they always think of that woman as a sheet anchor—they may have to sacrifice a little pride, but they'll go back to her if the worse comes to the worse. No man ever cuts away the apron-strings that hold him to a woman who was fool enough, once upon a time, to tell him he was the only son that Adam had in his mind when he gave Eve the once-over."

"Why do you always drop into slang when you're angry?"

"I'm not angry, Reggie, *darling*. And I'm no sucking dove, either."

"You've gone crazy!"

"And you've reverted to type," said Sadie.

He folded his arms and tried to look taller than he actually was. He set one foot in front of the other and gave a little stamp on the ground.

"On principle, I wouldn't allow Ricardo to think that he can do what he likes—morally," he said.

Sadie gave him a mocking smile.

"All right, John Barrymore!" she said. "That sounds fine! But from what I've seen of things, an Englishman's principles are governed by the amount

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

of money he has in his pocket, or the amount he hopes to entice out of the other fellow's."

"Sadie, you're rude! Absolutely rude!"

"You have to be rude to make an Englishman see a truth," said Sadie. "You're not a snob, Reggie—you're snobbier."

"*Boloney!*"

Sadie smiled and pushed a loose end of hair out of her eyes.

"That takes me, boy," she said.

He laughed with her.

"You had your foot on the gas that time, kid," he said.

"Hard down, boy. I must have been doing seventy! But you're a pretty good brand of petrol, Reggie. Now, do I get back to my job?"

"What's it this time, Sadie?"

"A book! I'm writing one."

"What's it all about? And when do you find time to do it?"

"It's all about snobbery," said Sadie, "and I find time between keeping the accounts of a bum circus and keeping a young man I know from losing his grip on real life."

"Will you get paid for the book, kid?"

"I don't know; I'm in England!"

"Still, it would be a thundering good piece of publicity for the show. What?"

She looked at him steadily and admiringly.

"Boy," she said, "you're not half so crazy as I thought you were. You'll go far in this line of business."

He took that seriously.

"I mean to go far," he said, fervently. "Look here, Sadie, I'm going to make you jolly proud of me one day. I'm in this business for keeps. And I'll not be satisfied until I have an outfit that will make old Barnum turn over in his grave with envy."

CHALLENGE!

"And then I suppose they'll give you a title," said Sadie.

"Don't let's start the row all over again," he protested.

"Well, why shouldn't they give you one, without borrowing it from your father? Isn't it worth a title, helping people to laugh when taxes and killjoys do their best to make the people believe that life is only a taste of the hell they're going to get when they're through with this world? Here! Give me a kiss. Now, get on with *your* job."

CHAPTER XX

CONFESSION

THERE was stillness in the night air. The moon had gone down, leaving a soft orange glow tinged with purple that was quickly blending with the darkness. In only one of the caravans was there a light showing. Ricardo was making ready to move out.

The House With the Golden Windows gave no sign of movement within.

"Sancho Panza", the stout manservant of the mystic, came from his darkened 'van to take further orders from his master. He climbed to the top step and leaned over the half-door.

"Harness up," said Ricardo, "and don't make any noise. Lead the horses out of the camp, and cross the common—the ground's firm. We'll strike the main-road half a mile down and make for the north."

Ricardo was dressed for the journey. The sweeping felt hat was already on his head; a cigar was between his lips; he spread a touring map on the tiny table and studied it, nodded in a self-satisfied way, carefully folded the map again and locked it away.

With exceeding care he arranged on the table a number of minor articles that might be indispensable on the journey—a torch, stout whipcord, small flask of spirits, jack-knife, and a revolver. There were two hurricane lanterns on the floor; he examined the wicks and the reservoirs. There were several letters on the table—he would post them higher up the country.

Reggie picked his way carefully over guy-ropes and around tents. He came to the steps of the lighted caravan and called softly:

"Ricardo!"

CONFESSION

The half-door was opened. Reggie climbed the steps and passed in.

From The House With the Golden Windows Phoebe came slowly, cautiously, glancing over her shoulder again and again as she walked. She hadn't seen her brother enter the caravan: she had been too intent on keeping an eye on the movements of "Sancho Panza" who was bringing the horses from the meadow in the near distance. She crept near Ricardo's 'van and remained, out of sight, just under a window.

"All set?" said Reggie.

"Waiting for the horses," said Ricardo, and his voice held that note of independence which is the privilege of the servant in the moment of dismissal. "Sit down, if you wish."

Reggie sat down and watched Ricardo check the details on table and floor.

"I'm sorry it's come to this," said Reggie awkwardly.

Ricardo smiled cheerfully.

"That's all right," he said. "We part as friends, I hope?"

"I wish you the best of luck," said Reggie. "Where to?"

"I'm making for London in the beginning," said Ricardo. "After that . . ." He made a gesture of helplessness. "Who knows?"

"You appreciate my position—don't you?" said Reggie.

"I'm afraid that I haven't considered it very carefully," said Ricardo. "It is your desire that we should dissolve partnership—if I may call it that—and I'm going. It doesn't help matters to regret anything that's gone past."

"Look here, old man—if I said anything in the heat of the moment this evening I'll take it back. I'm sorry."

Ricardo held out a hand. Reggie shook it warmly.

"It was the mystery that disturbed you," said Ricardo, and smiled rather bitterly. "Come to think of it, I might

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

be a little intrigued myself if the positions were reversed."

"I don't want you to leave us with any false ideas about myself and the rest of the family," said Reggie. "I haven't my father's sanction to take you into my confidence, but I'm going to tell you that he is a titled man."

"Sir Thomas Shadrow," said Ricardo, calmly.

"You discovered that?"

"Long ago," said Ricardo, indifferently.

"Did it surprise you?"

"Why should it? There are thousands of Society people in England, to-day, with their backs to the wall. Few of them have the courage of your father and—if I may say so—Lady Shadrow. I shall always remember her for the beauty of her character."

"Thanks," said Reggie. "I don't mind telling you that they need not have come into this life if they had shown less courage and had been prepared to accept charity."

"Nothing humiliates one so surely," said Ricardo.

"It hasn't impaired their health. My mother is twice as strong as she was in the old days: I'm convinced that she enjoys the life. My father is a different man—up to a point."

Ricardo looked at him sidewise.

"And, you——?"

"Oh, I suppose I'm a bit of a curiosity," said Reggie. "I'm enjoying myself. Put it like that."

"That's capital," said Ricardo. "At first, I suspected that it was a pose; then, I came to wish that a few thousands of other young fellows with handles to their names, or the promise of getting them, would show similar strength of mind."

"Thanks, again," said Reggie without enthusiasm.

Ricardo was ready to go. He moved to the door, rested his hand on it, then turned to Reggie.

"Since you've been frank with me," he said, "I'll

CONFESSION

be frank with you. I'll drop the mystery and relieve your mind of any feeling that you haven't been quite satisfied in taking up the attitude you have."

"I'm not quizzing, Ricardo. Let's just part as man from man, roadsters, nomads."

"Have you ever been to Winchester?"

"College?"

"No," said Ricardo, frowning. "Gaol?"

"Don't be funny at this juncture."

"I stayed there for quite a considerable time," said Ricardo.

"As guest of the Governor?"

"As guest of His Majesty," said Ricardo.

"The hell you have!"

"Yes, two years almost."

"You're fooling me?"

"No, but a woman fooled me. That was how I came to be sent there."

"I don't believe you, Ricardo."

"I try not to believe it, myself, but facts play havoc with the imagination. Once upon a time I was a doctor. A young, inexperienced, but—so they said—a clever youngster. My people were as proud of their line as you may be of yours. I was accepted into Society not because I was a clever and ambitious young doctor, but because I was the son of my father and mother—my mother who was as beautiful of character as Lady Shadrow. I can pay your mother no greater compliment."

Reggie had risen to his feet. He was facing Ricardo: in his eyes there was a look of amazement and yet it was strangely blended with triumph. This—this seemed to justify his action in demanding that Ricardo should go.

"I became acquainted with the young wife of a peer," said Ricardo, "a peer whose own moral principles were those of the common pimp. Physically, he was not sufficiently *clean* to occupy the marriage bed. She came

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

to me in great distress and confessed (I hate that word, by the way) that she had a lover and that she was likely to become a mother. You understand what I mean? She told me a story of domestic suffering that aroused all that was chivalrous and foolish in my young mind. She prevailed on me to perform an operation. It should have been easy—it was easy—but perhaps my nerves were not what they ought to have been. I knew that she was dying.

“The husband was sent for and he was afraid of the scandal that might be bequeathed by her to him. In her last moments, he persuaded her to incriminate me!

“The depositions were to the effect that her husband was the father of the unborn child, that she had resented motherhood, and that I had accepted the promise of favours in return for my services.

“Why didn’t I speak out? Because I am one of those poor fools invested with a load of foolish sentimentalism. Her lover, so I learned, was my own brother! And my brother was literally worshipped by my mother!

“There you are! A piece of melodrama, you may say, but bitter experience has taught me that melodrama is more common in everyday life than it is on the stage. I sacrificed my career. I went to gaol. I met there men who were much finer of thought than I, myself. I learned much from a study of their life.

“When I was free to come back to the world, I knew that I couldn’t hope to begin again. And, yet, the first person to approach me in the guise of friend was the depraved little rotter, the husband of the woman who died under my hand. He sought my services in a case of his own! He assured me that if I would undertake to ‘oblige’ his Society friends when they might have need of me, I could make twenty thousand a year!

“I kicked him out of my presence—one of the acts in my life that I shall always recall with a good deal of satisfaction. I took to the road. I love the road. I love the romance that shall be ever associated with the

CONFESSION

road. I love clean winds and clean people. That's all."

He grasped the extended hand and passed down the steps. Reggie followed and was standing by his side as "Sancho Panza" backed the horses between the shafts.

"May the good luck be yours, Ricardo," said Reggie.

Phoebe came furtively out of the shadows. The two men glanced at each other inquiringly. Neither spoke. She might not have seen her brother, for her gaze was riveted on Ricardo's face.

"I heard you, I heard you," she said and the sobs were in her throat. "You're going away, Ricardo—I shall always call you Ricardo." She reached up and clasped her hands behind his neck. "Take me with you—in your caravan! Take me, Ricardo! I want to go with you! I love you, Ricardo!"

Reggie moved forward as though he would unclasp her hands. Ricardo gave him a sign and he retreated a step.

"Not now, dear child," said Ricardo. "You will go into winter quarters with your parents. I have work to do in the north. When the spring comes again I shall return to you. Say that you believe?"

"I believe," she said and sobbed as she said it.

He stooped and kissed her upturned face again and again.

"Yes, I shall come back to you," he said, and repeated with deep emotion: "When spring comes again."

He handed her to her brother and turned to "Sancho Panza". They took their respective places in the caravans.

"All clear!" he cried out, in the old grandiloquent manner. "Northward, by the stars!"

The two caravans moved out across the common.

CHAPTER XXI

A QUIET GAME OF CARDS

HUSTLE and bustle in the camp! On the move! On the move! Tents down and packed, horses fed and watered, traces in a tangle, men flustering and blustering; artistes packing their trunks and calling to each other from the caravan windows. On the move! On the move! Wheels creaking to the heave of the horses, buckets clanging on their hooks beneath the tail-board, dogs yapping and scurrying out of the way of a boot. October sunshine mellowing woods and meadows; winds whipping the leaves from the trees and bidding them hurry to their winter sleep. Villages gaping and shouting encouragement: "Come again, soon! Come again, soon!" White clouds drifting across the sky. Hedgerows whistling at the call of the wind. Pigeon and plover circling and diving overhead.

On the move! Down the long white, winding road. Clinkety-clank! Clinkety-clank! Caravans wheezing and chuckling and swaying. Keep in line! Keep in line! Clinkety-clank! Southward to the coast and the steel-grey sea. Nearing the end of the season. The House With the Golden Windows showing the way, laughing in the sunshine, blinking in the dust. Reggie and Sadie side by side in the driver's seat: that was their throne, let him who dared usurp it.

"How long have we been on the road, partner?"

"A thousand years, so it seems."

"Happy, kid?"

"I'll tell the world!"

"Is it real, little peanut?"

"Don't wake me up."

"Life is good, kid?"

A QUIET GAME OF CARDS

"Sure, brother!"

"Your cheeks are nigger brown."

"Kiss 'em, boy, kiss 'em!"

"Look along the line, Sadie. All correct?"

"Okay, chief."

"Makes you want to sing, kid."

"Let it rip, big boy."

Harold the lanky dropped from his own 'van and swung himself up beside Sadie and his brother.

"Have you got a newspaper, old thing?"

"Don't be absurd," said Reggie, "we're taking a rest from worry. Where's Hogan?"

"Playing 'poker' with the blue-skinned man and the lady harpist."

"And Phoebe?"

"Washing her hair as we go along."

"And pater?"

"Making rabbit nets and snares."

"Tell him we shall be passing Sir Beaky Titmouse's place shortly. They used to be on the Bench together."

"Stop near the Titmouse wood if you like: that will suit the pater better."

"Harold, I'm dead keen on the pageant idea. Prepare for it during the winter and open with a fanfare in June."

"Sadie and I have worked out the historical episodes," said Harold.

"And I'll work on the vanity of the people."

"If there *is* any money about, we'll get it," said Harold.

"There's plenty of money, Harold, but no confidence between capital and labour."

"Are you going to talk politics?"

"If you like." Reggie leaned over the side to look along the procession. "If you like," he repeated, as he straightened himself.

"All right, he's gone back to his caravan," said Sadie. "Remarkable how Harold's changed for the better! He can split an infinitive without wincing."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"And, once, the poor mutt thought of being a pukka soldier or a parson!"

"The open air has made a new man of him."

"No, Sadie, it was the welt on the jaw the Steynning barber gave him in the beginning. I'd like to match them again all the same."

"Did you tell me you were going up to London soon, boy?"

"Next week, Sadie. Must see a few agents and I've got a film proposition I want to talk to you about. In fact, I've got a thousand ideas developing. Funny how the people are taking to these old-fashioned shows of ours?"

"But will they take to the pageant we have in mind?"

"It was your own idea! Don't go back on it," said Reggie.

"Will they take this historical stuff seriously?"

"You bet they will not. I'm going to guy it."

"You wouldn't dare, Reggie! England's greatness is based on reverence for her traditions."

"England loves to see and hear herself guyed."

"In the States we think a tremendous lot of England's traditions."

"Who's the snob now?" Reggie asked.

"The country would rise against you if you dared to cheapen England's dignity. Everyone who had a sense of art——"

"I'm out to commercialize art, old girl. And when I've made a fortune——"

"You'll buy a country seat and become a stuffy, wet-nosed old martinet yourself! And sit on the Bench and expect the world to take off its hat when you pass by."

"Wrong! I shall take a ship and settle down in another country where they don't pinch all your hard-earned money in order to repay America what they borrowed. Look at the poor old pater! Ruined by taxation! Heart bowed down! Dignity humbled in the dust."

A QUIET GAME OF CARDS

Alone and brooding ! Shunned by his own class who have a little money. Barred by the lower classes who suspect him of being a spy, or a Conservative, or one of these Crusaders you read about. By Jove, I didn't ask Harold if the pater got aboard."

"Give me the reins and go look-see."

He dropped lightly to the ground from the moving caravan and looked into each vehicle as the procession moved past him. Phoebe, briskly rubbing her newly-washed hair, gave him a greeting; Lady Shadrow, weaving tiny flower baskets for sale, leaned out of the window to inquire if anything had gone wrong.

"Where's the pater?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"He got so depressed in here," she said, "that I suggested he should sit with you and Sadie. Perhaps he's with Agatha."

Reggie looked into Aunt Agatha's caravan (she had one of her own by this time). Wung, the Pekingese, was the only occupant. Altogether there were eight or nine caravans, for the show crowd had been considerably augmented during the last month. Most of the new artistes were amateurs, but many were old roadsters whose experience was invaluable on occasion.

When the crazy-patterned caravan belonging to the Kordinskis drew abreast, Reggie darted in between it and the next, swung himself up and over the half-door and was just in time to avert a murder !

Packed within a small compass were seven or eight persons, all playing "poker". Sir Thomas Shadrow, ex-Justice of the Peace, was at the head of the table, and wedged in around the sides of the 'van were Hogan, Aunt Agatha, Marie the Fat, Mr. Buggs, two freaks who had recently joined the combination, and a small monkey which Aunt Agatha had lately taken into training. The monkey was perched on her shoulder and seemed to be calculating the worth of her "hand".

The row had started when Reggie climbed into the

den of sharpers. Sir Thomas, coatless, with his shirt-sleeves rolled above his elbows, was addressing Hogan:

"You opened to a 'jack-pot', you dam' thief, and have the sauce to ask for four cards. Where's your pair of 'jacks'?"

"Peace good Pint-pot," quoth Mr. Buggs, trying to restore peace.

"Don't give me your lip, Hairpin," roared Sir Thomas, "or out that door you'll go, head first."

"You'll put me with him," barked Marie the Fat.

"And glad to—you strumpet!"

"Tom!"—from Aunt Agatha. "Control yourself!"

"Keep your dam' monkey's face out of mine!" said Sir Thomas. He had got to his feet and was about to start a really rough house when Reggie appeared. He dropped back in his place, smiled in rather sickly fashion, tried to hide his cards beneath the table edge, and——

"Everything all right, my boy?" he inquired pleasantly.

"Yes," said Reggie with beautiful calm. "We're just coming into a little town where there's a fine old Norman Church, and an Elizabethan mansion that hasn't its equal in the country, and a police station that can hold the crowd of you if you don't make less noise. What do you think you're doing? Upholding the honour of the road, the dignity of the British, and the grandeur of Labour? Get into your respective vans, or I'll 'fire' the lot. You included, pater!"

The procession was halted until the gamblers sorted themselves out.

Reggie went back to his place near Sadie.

"All quiet on the western front, buddy?" she asked.

"All quiet, my dear," he said.

Clinkety-clank! Clinkety-clank! On the move!
On the move!

CHAPTER XXII

BIG TRAGEDIES IN LITTLE HOUSES

WITH Ricardo out of the way, Sir Thomas felt happier in his mind, but there was a good deal of smug complacency about his demeanour. Although he had transferred to Reggie the distasteful task of advising Ricardo that they would like to see the dust behind his caravan, he preened himself like a peacock as he told Virginia that he had done his duty as a parent who had the moral welfare of his daughter at heart!

Phoebe's attitude was provocative. If they had looked for tears or feared a "sinking into a decline", they were much too casual in their study of psychology. They would never be able to understand that the gentlemanly, submissive Phoebe was evolved from an audacious flapper by the very Cupid they had attacked so vehemently.

If she had reverted to the old type they would have had only themselves to blame. She didn't. She told Sadie that it was as though she had been allowed to peep into paradise before someone shut the gates. It had left her with a feeling, not of sadness nor of despair, but hopefulness that the gates would open again.

Towards the dictatorial, censorial attitude of her father, she was strangely lenient and forbearing. If it wasn't contempt that looked from her eyes it was something closely akin. The more he divested himself of his dignity and fraternized with the crowd, the more cynical became that hard light in her eyes. His boyish spirit that made so strong an appeal to Lady Shadrow, brought only an indulgent sigh from Phoebe.

When Sadie said to her: "I know you're not happy; don't you think you had better stay on the road with

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

us instead of going into the winter camp?" she shook her head resolutely.

"I'm going to wait there for him, Sadie," she said. "Moving about with the caravans might take my thoughts from him now and again. I don't want that to happen."

Sadie was deeply concerned.

"I didn't think you loved him so much as that," she said.

"He is the first and the last," said Phoebe, adding with a pathetic smile: "And it isn't a silly, immodest flapper that's speaking now. How I used to laugh at the romances of the Early Victorian novels and the heroines who set love before everything else. I can't laugh at them to-day, Sadie. My generation was given its freedom, but the chains would have been sweeter to bear. At least, that's how I feel about it."

"I think you're wonderfully brave, my dear," said Sadie, tenderly.

"You, too, are brave," said Phoebe. "I admire you intensely."

"I'm brave, maybe," said Sadie, "but it's just that little touch of coarseness in my nature that makes me brave, or seem to be. Now, you! I hate pride, but I adore dignity of the right sort."

"You'll miss me during the winter, Sadie?"

"I sure will, honey."

"And look forward to seeing me again in the spring?"

"I'll be there before the daffodils are showing," said Sadie.

"That will be in April," said Phoebe.

"I couldn't have said that off-hand," Sadie confessed.

"About the time the birds are nesting and the bluebells are beginning to think about opening. There'll be late crocuses in the woods to heighten the colour of the daffodils, and the chestnut trees will be bursting into leaf. Yes, he told me of all those glories; I had never thought of discovering them for myself."

"Did he tell you where he was going?" Sadie asked.

"No," said Phoebe without sigh or showing disappointment. "It wouldn't have occurred to me to ask

BIG TRAGEDIES IN LITTLE HOUSES

him where he was going, even if we had been man and wife. That's the depth of the love I have for him. It would be heavenly privilege to obey and await his return."

Sadie saw a great deal of Phoebe before The House With the Golden Windows headed for Ifield and its winter camp, but the name of Ricardo wasn't mentioned again between them. She didn't doubt that promises had been made and would be fulfilled, but she kept her thoughts to herself and joyed in the romance. Often, when they passed a procession of caravans, or a fair ground, Sadie marked the light of expectancy in Phoebe's eyes and the eagerness with which she scanned the faces of the nomads. She was looking for him, but there was nothing like sadness in her expression as she turned away.

From now onward till the temporary parting came, Sir Thomas absorbed a store of knowledge and anecdote to ponder during the winter. It was not remarkable that it should take what seemed to Reggie an unconscionably long while for a truth about his own county and country to filter through the little baronet's mind. If he was almost childlike in his awe when he came upon a phase of life that was commonplace to the others, it had to be remembered that all his life thus far he had lived in a fortress built of conceit, arrogance and colossal selfishness. "Am I living again?" he would ask of Virginia. "Did these things happen in my time, or am I dreaming it all?"

"You read your newspapers—didn't you?" said Reggie after an incident on the London-Worthing Road. "Ever since I was a boy, *The Times* was always carried most reverently to your bedside of a morning. It was a sort of ritual. What appealed to you most in that journal?"

"My dear Reggie," he expostulated, "what would you expect a gentleman to read? I had to keep myself informed on social matters, observe the society engagements, and—and see to it that wedding presents were duly forwarded. There were hunting notes to read:

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

how grave a flaw in a country gentleman's education if he didn't keep himself abreast of the hunting news! And, on principle, I always read the obituary notices lest one of my friends should pass away unnoticed by me."

It was on the main road, and the caravans had halted so that the horses might be watered. Four middle-aged men in army hospital blue were trudging along with smiling faces. They accosted Sir Thomas with the familiarity:

"Got a match, mate?"

He obliged them with a box and watched them light their cigarettes.

"Pity you're not going our way," he said, generously; "we might have given you a lift."

"We don't go far away from the Home," said one. "Not more than a couple of miles."

"What home?" he asked.

"Hospital, of course," said the man.

"And what is the nature of your complaint?"

"We haven't any complaint, mate—we're nearly satisfied—satisfied that it's no use grouching." He drew aside his blue tunic and showed the horrified Sir Thomas the still open wound. There was another in his thigh, he said, and he added, with a foolish laugh, that he "coughed a bit". "That was gas I copped at Ypres," he said.

"Do you mean to say that you are old soldiers?" Sir Thomas asked.

"We were young then," said the man and his hand shook as he took the cigarette from between his lips and looked at Reggie and Harold, who were backing a stubborn horse into the line.

"And you are still in hospital?" Sir Thomas was amazed. "But the War ended ten years ago."

"Did it, mate?" The man smiled resignedly. "It might have ended for you, but it's always with us."

"You'll get a good pension, of course?" said Sir Thomas. This, with a fine flourish of the head. England set her heroes in song and fable. England never forgot those who had been ready to lay down their life in her cause.

BIG TRAGEDIES IN LITTLE HOUSES

"Yes, a pension," said the man, bitterly. "About two bloody quid if you've lost both legs. It drops a bit if you've got one left. Oh, it's a fine life, a grand life! They pay us for doing nothing. And if only they'd put a gag in the mouth of damned old fools like yourself who seem to think we ought to be grateful for having stopped a shell or got a bellyful of poison gas, we'd be happier than the birds in the air."

On the outskirts of a village they came upon a bungalow set in a small and picturesque garden. Roses climbed over the porch; fantail pigeons cooed in a cunningly contrived cote near the path. In the window was a card: "Teas. Eggs for sale."

Lady Shadrow was greatly taken by the quaintness of the little abode, its scrupulous cleanliness, its charm. They had half an hour to spare, awaiting one of the men who had gone back to the last village to pick up a supply of nails. Virginia said she would like nothing so much as to take tea in the bungalow, or outside, in the sunshine of the garden.

She and Sir Thomas walked up the path and were received at the door by a faded little woman with drawn cheeks yet hopeful eyes. She invited them indoors and placed chairs in position. The room was simply but delicately furnished. On the wall over the fireplace was the photograph of a handsome young officer, and beneath it a row of medals and ribbons.

The faded woman went out to make the tea and in her absence a man with a black patch over his left eye came in. He was ill-dressed and his boots were soiled with dried mud. He spoke in a voice that was highly cultured, and subdued the fear that had come to Virginia at sight of him.

"Forgive me," he said. "I didn't know that anyone was here." He withdrew.

They heard him pass into the kitchen where the woman was preparing tea.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

She returned to them, carrying a tray, and began to set out the cups and plates.

"You have a beautiful little place here," said Virginia.

"Very beautiful, m'lady," said the faded woman.

"Rather lonely, perhaps, in the winter?"

"Lonely in the winter," the woman agreed, "but thank God for the summer."

"I suppose you do very well with your teas and eggs," said Sir Thomas, patronizingly.

"We carry on," she said. "Sometimes we find it a little difficult to pay the rent, but we generally manage to struggle through the winter. And there's always the summer to look forward to!"

Then came that awful shriek!

Lady Shadrow dropped her cup on the floor. Sir Thomas leaped to his feet, his face pallid, his whole body shaking. The door was flung open and the man with the patch over his left eye threw himself in, shouting wildly: "Take cover! Take cover!" He sprang on the little faded wife and bore her to a place beneath the window, shielding her from the imaginary shells that were coming over from the enemy. Frantically, she wrestled with him, calling: "William! William! All right, dear man! I'm with you!" And still he raved: "Take cover! Take cover!"

It was soon over. The awful aberration passed; he lay on the floor near the window and closed his eyes. The sweat stood out in great, uncanny drops from his forehead and beneath his eyes.

The little wife got to her feet, placed a cushion under his head and made some attempt to straighten her own dishevelled appearance.

"I'm so sorry, m'lady," she said in a broken voice. "He hasn't had one of the fits for weeks. It was just bad luck that it should have come on while you were here."

Virginia recovered composure before Sir Thomas had found his breath. She asked, gently, sympathetically:

BIG TRAGEDIES IN LITTLE HOUSES

"Fits?"

"Shell shock, m'lady," said the little faded thing.

"After all these years!"

"And no pension! Something was wrong, so they said, and I didn't trouble to go into it. I felt I'd rather work for him and not ask the Government for a penny. We kept our pride."

"Infamous!" said Sir Thomas. "Infamous! The country should remember."

Virginia looked down at the prostrate man.

"You are sure he will soon recover?" she asked fearfully.

"Soon, soon," said the little woman. "That was nothing to what he's had. They're getting milder every time. Thank God for that."

Virginia murmured, half to herself:

"My boys! My boys! Thank God they were spared to me!"

They left the cottage with the little faded woman's voice ringing through their mind:

"There's always the summer to look forward to!"

When he reached The House With the Golden Windows, Sir Thomas sat for a while with his chin resting in his hand. Virginia regarded him thoughtfully.

"Is it possible, dear man," she said with a sigh, "that there are still men of intelligence who regard war as inevitable and even essential to progress? War is declared across a table, so I've been told. Isn't there someone big enough and bold enough to say to the politicians and the diplomats: 'If you cannot avert war with the brains that have been given you, get out and let saner minds teach you the wisdom of compromise?'"

"That's only a woman's way of looking at it," he said. "The tail of the British Lion must not be trodden on." He got up from his chair and struck the old, familiar attitude of the patriot who fights the country's battles on his own hearth. "No, by God! Nobody must do that to the old Lion!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE "IDEA" MERCHANT

IT was Sir Thomas himself who found one of the most remarkable examples of human vitality, fecundity of ideas, originality of thought, optimism, and that unshakable self-confidence which, if properly exploited, may set empires on a solid foundation of prosperity. His name was Pinnhead—Horace Montague Pinnhead, "British to the core, sir, and let no man deny it!"

Reggie had informed his father that he required the services of a useful man who might enter into the spirit of the company, appreciate the beauty of altruism, and work for the general good. He had added, somewhat casually (for he was tired at the time), that he wouldn't dream of advertising for such a man: it was his firm conviction that the genius he was looking for might be tramping the roads in search of employment.

Sir Thomas discovered Mr. Pinnhead leaning over the gate of a ploughed field in the neighbourhood of Angmering, on the South Coast: he was addressing himself to a number of rooks. He turned an intelligent countenance towards Sir Thomas to ask:

"Now, how much seed should you say those birds devour in a season? How much do they cost the farmer?"

"I have no idea," said Sir Thomas, politely. "I have never thought of asking them."

"Asking—whom? The rooks?" said the stranger sternly.

"No, the farmers," said Sir Thomas, still with politeness.

"Thousands and thousands of pounds," said the stranger. "And that amount could be saved to the nation

THE "IDEA" MERCHANT

by the simplest of expedients. How? Poisoning the seed, of course! Isn't it amazing, nerve-shattering, to realize that the government is so inept that it couldn't have thought of that solution?"

Anyone save Sir Thomas would have had an answer ready, but he heard only the rather fine inflection in the stranger's voice and saw the hall-mark of culture in his eye.

The conversation that followed was a trifle one-sided, for after mentioning the requirements of his son, Sir Thomas was held breathless, awed, by the volubility of the wandering genius.

"My whole existence is devoted to the evolving of ideas that shall help forward a peculiarly lethargic world," said Mr. Pinnhead. "I confess that like many men who have received a tolerably good education, I wasted many years of my early life. I took a professorial appointment in one of our seats of learning: then came the urge, the incentive, the irrepressible desire to exploit the brains my Maker had given me. The Great Idea has been born, it is being nurtured in my mind. The capital I require is assured in the fullness of time. Meanwhile, I am disposed to augment my income by any task that may be offered."

In the result, Sir Thomas took him along to the camp and presented him to Reggie, who was attended by Sadie, Marie Kordinski, Mr. Buggs, and Harold. They had been having a friendly altercation about the checking of "dead-heads" at their entertainments.

The arrival of Mr. Pinnhead effectually stopped the argument. He was wearing a coat that had been made for a much smaller person, yet he insisted on keeping it buttoned (there was only one button—the bottom one), so that his waist-line would have brought tears of envy to the eyes of Aunt Agatha if she had seen it in an earlier day when she was slimming. The sleeves ended midway between wrist and elbow, giving the frayed cuffs of what had been a dress shirt an opportunity to display their dirt.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

His trousers were in nowise related to his coat: they came of different families; for whereas the coat was more modest than a maiden at her first dance, the "bags" were full, arrogant, and impudently indifferent to the decrees of fashion.

It was when Mr. Pinnhead began his speech that the little group realized that they were in the presence of a profound contradiction of the axiom that clothes make the man.

"I seek an opportunity to benefit the world with whatever gifts I may possess," he said. "And I am satisfied, thus early, that I am speaking to one (he bowed to Reggie) who would not allow these rude habiliments to warp his judgment of a man's true worth."

"On the contrary," said Reggie, generously.

"Experience has taught me not to limit my ambitions."

"Why should you?" said Reggie.

Mr. Pinnhead cleared his throat and gave the lapel of his coat a tug.

"I am not aware of the true nature of the post that is vacant," he said, "but when you have heard me through you will understand why a partnership in this enterprise is the subtle thought in my mind. I was educated at Bilkdown Secondary College and passed on to Jesus College, Cambridge, took my B.A. in Law and Economics, was called to the Bar, and—and so on, and so on."

"We'll take the 'so on' for granted," said Reggie. "How about the ideas?"

"This country is suffering from a lack of ideas," said Mr. Pinnhead, turning to Mr. Buggs, who was lighting a cigarette, to borrow a match with which to probe his left ear. "Tell me—are British goods known abroad? No, sir! We do not tell the world of their marvellous quality. My idea is to *show* the world examples what we can do."

"Don't pause for the cheers," said Reggie, encouragingly. "How are you going to show the goods?"

THE "IDEA" MERCHANT

"I should buy an obsolete battleship from the Government," said Mr. Pinnhead. "As these useless vessels are only broken up, the purchase price will be no more than a few thousands. We remove the guns and general clutter and transform the battleship into a floating exhibition of British goods. Manufacturers will buy their space in the exhibition so that our expenses are defrayed before we sail——"

"Where to?"

"The ports of the Seven Seas," said Mr. Pinnhead grandiloquently.

Carelessly, he straightened his shoulders so that the clasping button of the tight-fitting coat broke asunder—plonk!—and hit Mr. Buggs on the nose.

"But that is only one idea," Mr. Pinnhead went on. "I want to place agriculture on its feet."

"Excellent," said Sir Thomas, enthusiastically. He was the only one in the audience capable of appreciating this genius.

"What has brought the English farmer to poverty?" asked Mr. Pinnhead, and with a magnificent gesture of the right arm he indicated the fields around them.

"Bad beer and 'Farmer's Glory' (cards)," Harold ventured.

"Foreign wheat and foreign meat," said Sir Thomas, indignantly.

"No, sir," thundered Mr. Pinnhead. "The middleman has done the foul thing. I am going to exterminate him! I shall organize a chain of abattoirs throughout the country where the cattle may be slaughtered. A chain of motor-vans will convey fresh meat daily to consumers. I shall reduce the price of meat to the consumer by fifty per cent. and still be able to pay the farmer fifteen per cent. more for his stock."

"And the cost of all this?" said Reggie.

"That problem is already solved," said Mr. Pinnhead, adding darkly: "I have the solution in my pocket. Fish for the million is another of my schemes. Every town

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

shall have its own cold storage for fish only. The Saviour fed the multitude with two loaves and five fishes : I must be allowed a little more latitude."

"Certainly," said Sir Thomas, in all seriousness, and he pressed closer.

"Now," said Mr. Pinnhead, after clearing his throat again, "we come to a subject that is nearer your heart, sir. Entertainment. You will agree that the cinema stands paramount in the affections of the people?"

Marie the Fat looked at Clarence Brough Fitzherbert and frowned.

"I propose," said Mr. Pinnhead, "to erect a cinema in every town that has a population of not less than four thousand and equip it with the very latest talking apparatus. Each cinema will be packed nightly. Why? Because my stock film shall be one of the townspeople themselves. My cameras shall 'shoot' in every street of the town. I know the weakness of human nature. Vanity will draw the people to my cinema to see themselves even if they have to sell their virtue to pay the price of admission."

"Clarence?" said Marie Kordinski, faintly.

Fitzherbert didn't hear her; he was standing in open-mouthed wonder.

"Through the medium of the cinema," said Mr. Pinnhead, "I shall eradicate the aloofness which is the greatest failing of my countrymen."

"Buggs!" shouted Marie.

Clarence heard her this time and retiring a few paces from the group he knelt down on the grass although it was not yet sundown.

"May I inquire how you are going to get all the necessary capital?" said Reggie.

Mr. Pinnhead answered promptly :

"Cross-word competitions," he said.

There followed a silence so deep and impressive that Mr. Buggs could be heard licking his lips preparatory

THE "IDEA" MERCHANT

to a more than usually robust appeal to the Almighty to destroy the talkies.

Marie sighed relievedly and turned to Mr. Buggs.

"All right, *Clarence*," she said, sweetly. "Don't waste it—save it for to-night."

Mr. Pinnhead gazed perplexedly at the company. Couldn't they understand? The newspapers and periodicals were offering thousands of pounds weekly for a solution of these problems. And he was a man of education, a lord of language, an erstwhile professor. They couldn't prevent his winning every pound that was offered. But before he came into his fortune, he was prepared to take a job——

"Come and have a look at the job," said Reggie, quietly, "and if you think that your brain power is sufficient to tackle it, you can start in to-day. Can you dig with a spade?"

"Alas, I cannot dig," said Mr. Pinnhead, in the tone of one who seeks to humour a lunatic.

"Could you skin a rabbit and give 'cookie' a hand in the galley?"

"No, no, I couldn't skin a rabbit," said Mr. Pinnhead, regretfully.

"Peel potatoes, maybe?"

"Er—no, I don't think I could peel potatoes," said Mr. Pinnhead.

Reggie set his hands on the shoulders of the genius and spun him around so that he faced the high road.

"Slide," he said firmly. "Slide on your feet, if you don't want to slide on your ear!"

Mr. Pinnhead slid.

CHAPTER XXIV

BLIND CAROL, THE HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

OCTOBER ! There had been rude winds and heavy rains in the beginning of the month. There had been toil for giants in strength and courage. There had been floods to sweep away tents and endanger even the caravans. Tempers had been rasped, sharp words had cut with the incisiveness of knives. Animals had fretted nerves through their peculiarities under stress of weather. Few members of the combination that hadn't been kicked and tumbled about until they couldn't sit down on a spot of their anatomy that didn't ache.

In all this commotion, ordeal and nerve-straining worry, the fortitude of two members stimulated the others. Lady Shadrow and Phoebe her daughter touched greatness in this period. Virginia had never been so beautiful of character, so helpful with her optimism, so comforting with her reassurances.

And Phoebe, far from being morose because of what had happened to her new-found romance, developed a cheeriness of nature that was as infectious as it was unforced. The old banter of her Highfield days was not allowed to return : she was living in a different world, now. There was always the spring to look forward to ! That was in her eyes and speech. No hardship could be so great that it might menace her dreams. *He* would come back to her in the spring. She spoke very seldom about Ricardo, but her mother knew that he was never out of her thoughts. Tactfully, sympathetically, Virginia voiced those sentiments that might strengthen the girl's courage yet never leave the impression that they were invitations to proffer confidences. She might be reading in the caravan, or on a

BLIND CAROL, HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

grassy slope within the camp, and she would look up from her book and quote some passage that had made appeal to her—some love passage that might have some bearing on the romance that had come into Phoebe's life.

"It may sound like a platitude," she said, one day, "but is there anything more beautiful in life than true love?"

"Nothing," said Phoebe, her gaze fixed on a distant ridge of downland. "Nothing," she said again.

"I cannot imagine the condition of mind that prefers the hectic pleasures of modern life—the night-clubs, theatres, suppers, drinking. Do they indulge these weaknesses in order to forget? Have they been unable to discover the great truth that happiness lies in ourselves and the joy we bring to the world, not what we take from it?"

"I have forgotten the old life," said Phoebe, quietly.

"Of course you have, my darling," said Virginia. She followed her daughter's gaze. "Look at that long white road that comes curving down from the hills," she said. "Have you never thought, Phoebe, that roads leading over hills are like promises? I always find myself whispering as I gaze on one: 'Watch! Watch! Someone will come into sight in a moment! Now, who shall it be?' And I think of all the people I would love most to see and I actually bring myself to believe that the promise will be fulfilled if I have faith."

"Yes," said Phoebe simply, and lapsed into silence.

The Shadd Rowe Fair had travelled along the South Coast and settled itself for a fortnight in the neighbourhood of Lewes. They were still prospering. There was novelty in the old form of entertainment they were able to provide. The genius of Sadie and Reggie combined a business *flair* with art: they knew the value of surprise and incorporated much local lore in the programme they offered.

Following the rains and the wind, a period of glorious

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

sunshine was given. The landscape smiled. The leaves were changing their hue, the smell of autumn rose like incense from weald and downland. It was as though summer had turned back to remind them of the glories she had bestowed that year.

Of late, Virginia had enjoyed nothing so much as the pony and carriage that Reggie set aside for her use. When the company pitched camp for a few days, this small conveyance gave her an opportunity of wandering about the district. Reggie had not wished to spoil the gift by making it an advertising medium: indeed, it was Lady Shadrow's own idea that the cream-coloured pony should carry a saddle cloth informing the beholders that the show must be seen if anything like depression had fallen on the locality. Nothing was more calculated to soften the features of the harsh and restore the smile of happiness to a tax-ridden community. There was a gaily-coloured sheet on each side of the carriage and similar inducements to visit the entertainment were printed thereon. Moreover, Virginia, wandering slowly through the old market towns and hamlets, distributed bill matter and even sold tickets.

There was nothing undignified in this labour. Her sweetness of nature commended her to everybody with whom she spoke; she listened to a cottager's tale of woe with equal sympathy to that which she extended to an upper class recluse. Of an evening, when work was done and the company sat around their camp-fires, she related stories of all she had seen and heard.

In all Sussex there is no more interesting locality than that of Lewes, a comparatively small market town that seems to lean on the summit and slope of a hill and is never itself quite certain when an earth tremor might come and compel it to slither down into the valley.

Throughout the pages of history the town and district figure frequently, and the only people who do not appear to attach much importance to the fact are the residents themselves. Probably they are too intellectual

BLIND CAROL, HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

to take historians seriously. Or it may be that they have never got over the affront to their dignity when, after burning a few martyrs on the top of the hill, the Press of that day made an undue fuss about their little frolic.

When you speak of Sussex, you must have Lewes in mind. Every phase of the county life is to be found there. The best brand of the most unintelligible dialect is always on offer. They still call a home-made scythe handle a "wumspun snaythe", and employ the more intriguing "Letbehowtwill" instead of the dull "No matter what may happen".

When that bright young fellow, William of Normandy, invaded England and brought with him those millions of English people who tell you without a flicker of an eyelash that their "people" came over with the Conqueror—when William decided to tackle Harold on his own ground, he seems to have been less cocksure of victory than was Caesar, who approached Britain by way of Kent on the south-east coast. Or, maybe, he was more prudent. He fancied there might be a chance of having to call the fight off and get back to his corner.

Therefore, William selected the narrowest sea passage and came straight across the English Channel instead of beating up through the spume of the grey North Sea. Along the Sussex coast he created six baronies, and built six castles, each one a key position. The job of these barons was precisely similar to that of the army generals of to-day, working under a generalissimo. If William were resting, or taking a night off in the approved manner of that day, the barons were expected to do a little fighting on their own account and not bother him. If they met with a reverse he had them lampooned in the Press which we may suppose even he couldn't do without. If they brought off a coup he saw to it that the laurels were firmly planted on his own head. Probably the system goes back further than William, but it has been carried on, along with other English traditions,

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

right up to recent times. Those communiques during the last war! The historians will fasten on them with avidity. "I have the honour to report that I engaged the enemy yesterday and drove him back ten miles." Or, "I regret to report that General Brasstop (whom the War Council appointed contrary to my considered judgment) was severely defeated in a minor engagement."

Anyhow, the Castle of Lewes (or the ruins of it) commands one of the most imposing views in the county. Less than ten miles south is the English Channel, and from the summit of Mount Harry, the silver streak may be seen glistening in the sunshine.

There was seldom a dull week for Lewes in those early days: there was always a fight going on with somebody or another. That spirit remains. Even to-day the bellicose visitor can always be certain of getting a good fight in Lewes. Some of the Sussex yeomen are stouter in the chest than the bulls they breed. When the "Corinthians" were looking for new material for the bare-knuckle prize ring they generally coached down from London to Lewes, picked up some "willing lad", took him from his farm, and had him trained for the game.

The ruins of the Priory of Lewes, built about 1076 by William de Warenne, are still to be seen. It was built by the earl for the pardoning of his sins and those of his wife, Gundrada. He put up the money, as the irreverent would say, and was in nowise parsimonious about the job. Enormous riches were deposited within the Priory, and when Henry the Eighth, in a later day, "checked up" on his bank balance and foreclosed on monasteries throughout the land, the Lewes Priory was one of the first to be plundered. The fighting spirit of the district received some impetus from this. The monks might have subdued it in time if they could have had Henry poisoned by one of the experts of the day. The monks had a pigeon house near the Priory with

BLIND CAROL, HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

accommodation for three thousand pairs of doves !
The will for peace was there.

When he comes to read the story of Lewes Priory, the iconoclast may be taken with the fancy that among the historians who dealt with that period which embraces the Battle of Hastings, there was the prototype of that smart young journalist of Fleet Street who sings in his bath : "God, give me this day the scoop that startles !" Those chroniclers who were contributing to the Book of Traditions infused poetry into the death of King Harold, and even managed to drag in what we call the sex interest. When William of Normandy feared that the fight was going against him because of the stubbornness of the English, he instructed his archers to shoot high in the air so that their arrows might fall like bolts from the skies. Harold, we are told, glanced upward, and one of those arrows dropped into his eye and finished his interest in the battle. Two monks named Osegoode Cnoppe and Ailric de Childemaister, of Harold's Abbey of Waltham, waited on the Conqueror, the following day, and asked permission to search for the corpse of their Royal patron. But these good fellows couldn't find that which they sought among the heaps of slain, so they returned for Harold's favourite, Editha the Fair, known as "Swansneck". She picked her way among the dead and led the searchers to the spot where the king's corpse lay.

The original "scoop" merchant wasn't to be satisfied with that story. He appears to have doubted the "love interest" yarn, or it may be that he couldn't get the hang of those monkish names and was fearful of misspelling them. Anyway, he turned in a piece of "copy" that must have knocked his news-editor sideways. King Harold, he said, did not die on the field of battle, but was carried to Lewes where he recovered from his wounds and lived long and peacefully in the Priory !

Perhaps it is less disturbing to the mind to accept as veracious the story of the fateful arrow. It might

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

be deplorable if scepticism threw doubt on all those great incidents of the past upon which has been built the valour of a nation. How humiliating, for instance, if it were proved that Nelson changed his mind about going to Trafalgar and that if he asked anybody to kiss him, it certainly wasn't Captain Hardy. And what if Napoleon escaped from St. Helena and lived to a ripe old age on a chicken farm in Surrey?

To return to the gentle Virginia.

Most assuredly, she did not allow fact to rob humbug of all its sweetness. It was during her wanderings around Lewes that she made the acquaintance of one who taught her the beauty of sun, moon and stars, although he, himself, had never seen them.

His name was Carol—Blind Carol, and his age was about twenty-three. She met him on the high-road that climbs out of Lewes and winds its way around a fork in the Downs, then northward to the weald. She saw him first in the near distance: he was swinging along in the middle of the road, his head thrown back, his voice raised in song. She was driving in the same direction and noted that excavators had dug a hole in the road, left it unguarded, and gone away to their midday meal. It was the curious action of the singer that gave rise to conjecturing in her mind. He walked along boldly until he was within a foot of the gaping hole, then he cocked his head slightly to one side after the manner of a thrush on a lawn listening for the sound beneath the turf that shall betray the worm. He side-stepped to the path and continued his walk.

When the pony drew level with him Virginia saw his face and marked the sightless eyes. She halted the pony and spoke to him, inquiring the way to Ringmer. Within a few minutes he was seated beside her in the pony carriage and his infectious laughter was bubbling in her heart.

And she murmured to herself, long before that journey came to an end: "When the night is dark and

BLIND CAROL, HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

impenetrable and I bruise my foot against a stone, I shall think of Blind Carol and forget the pain."

He was young and virile and the throw of his shoulders was that of a Greek athlete: the poise of the head was that of the ardent bird lover in wet woods at eventide, reluctant to lose a note the wind may carry. The lids of the blue eyes (so sadly blue!) were not closed, and when Virginia had become inured to what she conceived to be the pathos of it, she found in the sightless eyes a smile that was different from all others that illumine the face of the sighted.

Never had she met so cheery a soul, so happy and contented a human being. Life was good to him—inexpressibly good! Life was laughter—the world was made for laughter so his mien implied. Trouble was an impostor and could be dismissed by a turn of the head, a shrug of the shoulders or a chuckle that came bubbling up from the very heart itself. Even when in serious mood, when some given proposition insisted that he should ponder it, there was still that smile showing through the blue of the eyes that had never seen.

There came to Virginia's mind that beautiful poem by Le Gallienne:

"What of the darkness? Is it very fair?
Are there great calms, and find ye silence there?
Like soft-shut lilies all your faces glow
With some strange peace our faces never know,
With some great faith our faces never dare.
Dwells it in darkness—do ye find it there?"

Blind Carol met her again and again. They were kindred souls. Often, they left the pony in some sheltered place and trod the Sussex Downs together. There wasn't a path that baffled him: even the winding shelves formed on the slopes by the fold-finding sheep were familiar tracks to him. He joyed in the breeze that stirred the gorse: he joyed in the song of the lark:

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

he joyed in the aromatic vapours that came like incense from the newly-turned earth.

Carol was born blind. He came into a world that must for ever remain a place of his own imagining. Virginia learned from him that to have possessed and lost is greater affliction than never to have possessed. He had a blind friend, he told her, who lost his sight when he was twenty years of age.

"I have tried to teach him all that an unsighted man needs to know, but somehow, I cannot make him contented. He cannot *forgive*."

"How sad! How sad!" said Virginia. "A blind man always makes me feel sad."

"Never pity the blind, lady," said Carol. "Sympathy is different and more appreciated. You may say there is no difference, but there is, lady. He likes to keep his pride. Now, if you should see a blind man hesitating to cross a street, walk by his side, but don't grasp his arm and make an exhibition of it. Say to him, 'All right, old fellow! I'm going across, too!'"

Carol never employed a walking-stick. He said, with a laugh, that he wasn't a human woodpecker and couldn't abear the sound of a fellow tapping his way along. His hearing was abnormally acute: there were times when he started a fear in Virginia's mind that he had hoaxed her about his lack of sight.

"That's a badly trimmed hedge on your left," he said once. "And if there's anything I abhor it's a badly trimmed hedge."

It was badly cut: long tendrils were swinging in the breeze.

"How do you know?" asked Virginia. "What tells you the truth?"

"The wind," he answered simply.

She remained silent—ashamed that desuetude had impaired the faculties that had been given her.

He loved to amaze her with his topographical knowledge. As he sat beside her in the pony carriage he

BLIND CAROL, HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

would say : "That's Downland Lane we've just passed !" In his mind there was a perfect picture of the countryside. He said that the openings into different lanes offered different sounds. He didn't look for name-plates—he listened for sounds. He told her of faces and forms fantastically woven into his dreams of what the world was like. She never sought to disillusion him : his were more beautiful conceptions than hers, more human in their kindliness, more Christian-like in their appraisal. His soul was the judge ; prejudice was hers.

Virginia, on her return to the camp, told Sir Thomas of Carol and all that had moved her so deeply. She thought it might strengthen the courage of the little baronet. He had been having a word or two with Hogan who was standing a few yards away while Virginia spoke.

"Oh, I suppose blindness has its compensations," said Sir Thomas, rather sourly. "There are lots of things in life a fellow would be all the better for not seeing." He was staring hard at Hogan as he said this.

Sadie was deeply interested in the account of Carol.

"I know what I'd like to ask him," she said, suddenly. "Supposing an angel came down from Heaven to say he would give him one second of sight, whom or what would he most like to see in that second ? I know what my answer would be. I never saw my mother, nor even a photograph of her. Wouldn't Carol like to see his mother in that second ?"

"No," said Reggie, who had come into the circle. "I don't hold with sentiment. If I were in his place in those circumstances I would like to see my own face."

Sir Thomas threw up his head because of an unexpected short, half-suppressed laugh.

"What was that, Hogan ?" he called out.

"I didn't speak," said Hogan, and walked away in the direction of his tent.

The next time Virginia met Blind Carol she put to him the proposition made by Sadie. The answer was quite different from what she had expected.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"I'd pray God not to give me that moment of sight, lady," he said. "I might not have the courage to go back into the darkness."

The note of seriousness lasted only a second; the next he was making her laugh with him at some humorous aspect of life. Cheery, happy fellow! Revelling in his dreams and visions! Striding along the high-road with head inclined to left or right. Listening for the sounds and the silences that the sighted do not understand. Halting when the wind or the "blankness" said, "No!" Striding manfully forward when the way was clear. Courageous as the shield to the spear; grateful as the flower to the sun; imaginative as the painter at his easel; happy as the babe that laughs in its sleep.

The Shadrows learned from Blind Carol a great deal of philosophy that was helpful during their stay on those Sussex Downs that lead to the sea. He reasoned them out of many fallacies; and he strengthened them in many resolves. They felt that far from feeling aggrieved against the fates that had made them wanderers, they ought to be immeasurably grateful for the joy of life.

Sir Thomas had lived in the county all his life, but he hadn't read the first page of its history until he took to the road. He hadn't taken the trouble to study his fellow man; altruism was a word that had no meaning for him. Carol kept him enthralled by his stories of the smuggling days when that part of the coast was more lawless than any other in the kingdom. The stories had been collected from a thousand sources, for the blind man was voracious in his appetite for legend; his memory was unfailing.

The coast from Newhaven to Eastbourne, facing the English Channel, was the stretch most favoured by "the gentlemen", as the smugglers were called. The inhabitants were intensely loyal to the breakers of the law. It has been so through the ages. Even the children were inspired with this respect. "Now, don't look out of the windows if you should hear the gentlemen go by,"

BLIND CAROL, HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

was the warning given by mothers when they tucked the little patriots up in bed for the night. Children soon get the hang of these exhortations. It is the milk that he-men are suckled on! One of these days a murderer will come into his own.

"Why 'gentlemen'?" asked Sadie.

Blind Carol was sitting with them at the camp-fire. The sightless blue eyes glowed. He fancied, he said, that the custom of calling these smugglers "gentlemen" originated in the fact that they actually were gentlemen according to social rank.

Reggie watched the effect of Carol's further words on his father and winked at Sadie.

Carol explained to them that in the very beginning smugglers didn't go in for silks and tobacco and spirits—they didn't bring contraband into the country because there wasn't anything in the way of duties to avoid. The "Crusaders" hadn't got into their stride. The most lucrative illicit trade was in wool—wool which was smuggled to the Continental merchants. King Edward the First started the trouble, or gave the rascals the idea, by putting a heavy export duty on wool: the merchants of the Continent wanted English wool: the smugglers of Sussex saw to it they had wool. Edward the Third was even more determined than his grandfather to protect the broadcloth industries of the weald and the smugglers were threatened with hanging if they were caught. And he made it a terrible offence to wear any clothes that had been manufactured abroad.

The rum-runners of a later period wouldn't have got a "break" in this Edward's reign.

Ten towns were appointed "staples"—where the wool was weighed and sold to English manufacturers. The derivation of the term, "wool staplers", is apparent.

The more rigorous the law the more money the wool smugglers accumulated. It is only necessary for a Government to forbid the sale of something in order

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

to send up its value and create an army of patriots whose first exercise every morning is to put the thumb to the nose and spread out the fingers fan-wise.

In those days, tradition was just as much a fetish as it is to-day. Proud of their country and its place in the sun, the higher and intellectual classes seldom lost an opportunity to impress on the rank and file the grandeur of serving one's country. That was until this same class discovered that there was corn in Egypt. In other words, there was plenty of Big Money to be made out of smuggling wool abroad if it were done on a *large* scale. Petty larceny was ever a matter for contempt.

The county gentleman of those days might appear to be a "hick", or a rustic, or a conceit-inflated piece of humanity, but when there was a money proposition lying around he knew how to get his teeth into it. He went into the smuggling business with all the zest he used to put into fox-hunting, and he was streets ahead of the modern Chicago rum-runners in his shrewdness. Why? Because he first became an administrator of justice. He got himself appointed to a seat on the Bench of those days and so saved the court the irksome job of indicting him for smuggling. The Chicago gunmen might learn a great deal from the career of some of these Sussex gentlemen.

They worked hard at this wool-exporting enterprise. It was quite common for as many as a hundred and fifty thousand sheep to be shorn within a few weeks on the Romney Marshes near Pevensey, the fleeces being dispatched to the merchants on the other side of the Channel. It meant the founding of large fortunes, and who would dream of laying information against an administrator of the law on a charge of swindling the revenue or defying the country's edicts? Think of the legion of stalwart Americans who push out their chest as they sing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and raise Cain if their bootlegger hasn't delivered the forbidden whisky on time.

BLIND CAROL, HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

Many a fine old English family of to-day owes at least a remnant of its fortune to the daring of its ancestors who braved the winds of the Channel and the vigilance of the king's supervisors, and returned to their home after a dirty night's work on the coast to resume the duty of hanging poachers of game. To-day, there is no more sincere admirer of Southdown mutton than the dignified old justice of the peace. As he rides his old mare home from the police court he will gravely raise his box hat in respect if a wicked-looking old ram should wink at him across the hedge. It is the atavistic strain of homage to whom and what homage is due.

Blind Carol loved to tell these stories of smuggling on the Sussex coast. He was happier in his narrative when he came down the years, past the wool-exporting period, and recounted the deeds of the "gentlemen" who "imported" wines and spirits, lace and tobacco. He had roamed, with Virginia as companion, through the romantic old lanes around Alfriston and Jevington and the Cuckmere. (The paths the smugglers followed are still there. The narrow creek still runs down the valley to the sea—it was up that creek that the "gentlemen" conveyed their contraband to its hiding-place. There is still the tavern in Alfriston where one may see the secret apartment half-way up a chimney: therein the smugglers concealed themselves when the excise men became too inquisitive.)

There were black-hearted scoundrels among these "gentlemen"—men who would slit the throat of an informer as readily as they would wring the neck of a cockerel: many of them were hanged in public—the last gibbet is preserved on a green near Ditchling—and their bodies were allowed to dangle in chains until for sanitary reasons they were removed and buried. But taking them as a whole they were sportsmen to a degree. (Modern methods in Chicago, for instance, are no tribute to romance.) Most of the inhabitants lent the "gentlemen" assistance whenever they could,

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

and they never went unrewarded. A farmer might find that his mare had been taken from its stable during the night: he didn't broadcast the news to the authorities. He knew that she had been borrowed and would be returned in the morning. He was seldom wrong. And when he had patted the mare, he went to the hayrick and searched for, and found, the keg of brandy that had been left by way of a hiring-fee.

The Church didn't frown on the smugglers by any means. The Church was distinctly human in those days. There was one old parson who inquired of his sexton why the bells were not ringing for service. The sexton closed one eye and informed him that it wasn't Sunday. "It is Sunday," said the parson. "Well, there can't be any service to-day," said the sexton. "The church is full of brandy kegs and the pulpit's crammed with tea." The smugglers had been disturbed by the excise men the night before and had found sanctuary in the church, where they had dumped their loot. Did the parson call down a curse on their heads for so defiling the sacred place? He did not. He told the sexton: "Let it be known to the faithful that I am taken with sickness this day and there will be no service."

These stories and many more did Blind Carol bring to the nomads. They looked for his coming with all the eagerness and hopefulness with which they looked for the morning sun. He was the most welcome "dead-head" in the history of modern entertainment: he walked into the show whenever he chose, and among the members of the troupe he was the mascot that brought them luck.

Very gentle and courteous was Carol: he could sit by the side of the bearded lady who had lately joined the Fair and leave her with the impression that for once in her life she had met a man who could appreciate her at her true worth and not at her *face* value. Carol was guided by the voice, not the eyes.

BLIND CAROL, HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

Phoebe loved the blind man. She was taken with the fancy that she could tell him of her most secret dreams ; and because he could not see her he would never betray. She told him of Ricardo, and Carol joyed with her in the romance.

There came a morning when, after a fortnight's stay in the same place, appetites became a little jaded and tempers a trifle frayed. Sir Thomas was livery : he was for moving on to some other locality, but Reggie, equally devoid of "snap" at dinner, insisted that they must stay on ; money was fairly easy ; business must come before stomach. That was the vulgar way he put it.

Really, they had nothing to complain about so far as food was concerned, for Hogan and Sir Thomas had become expert in the handling of snares, and Hogan knew a good ferret when he saw one. Aunt Agatha, too, helped considerably in this respect. From a drover she had purchased a "long dog"—which is known to the casual as a lurcher. She trained that skinny-looking fellow with a skill a Romany chal would have envied. She taught him the necessity for silence at all times : he was never heard to bark ; but greater than all, he came to understand the language of signs. If Aunt Agatha should encounter a uniformed policeman while "Togo", the lurcher, was "working" a field by the side of the high-road, she was not conscious of any alarm. The lurcher might come out of the field at the very moment when the officious minion was nearing the widow of the late Lord Briskett. "This your dog?" he might say. "How dare you?" Aunt Agatha would reply. And the lurcher would walk past her as though it had never seen her before in its life.

Then came that morning when failing appetites threatened the "treasury". Even if money were coming in from the locals who enjoyed the entertainment provided by the troupe, that hateful feeling of nausea was beginning to sap the energy of several of them.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Sir Thomas thought it was the fault of the cooking ; Hogan said he had found that the beer wasn't so good in those parts as it used to be.

Harold said he couldn't look at the Downs without smelling the bones of the dead Romans who lay buried under the ramparts.

Blind Carol listened to all these grievances with a serious expression on his face. Then :

"I know of only one hotel in this county," he said, "where the food is so good that you cannot get enough of it. Amazingly good."

"In pity's name lead us to it," said Sir Thomas. "The very sight of a pheasant or jugged hare turns my stomach over."

"You will need to be a good walker," said Carol, "and unless you got up early you might find that other customers of the hotel had cleared the larder. Why, it's more famous than any of your London hotels."

"I'll sit up all night and wait for the dawn," said the little baronet, eagerly. "I hate to confess the vulgarity, but my mind is getting sluggish in keeping with my inside."

"Lack of the proper food," said Carol sententiously, "is the beginning of every serious controversy."

"How come, brother?" said Sadie.

"The stomach controls the mind," said Carol. "If all the Brass Hats who run wars sat down to a thundering good dinner before thinking of starting the battle, there wouldn't be any battle."

"When do we start for this perfect hotel?" Harold asked.

"As early as possible in the morning," said Blind Carol. He moved in the direction of Reggie's voice. "Have you never thought of running a small country hotel?" he asked. "If I had the capital I should start one just like this little place to which I'm taking you."

"What's the class of customer?" asked Reggie. "And have they got the money to pay a stiff price?"

BLIND CAROL, HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

"I have heard of men and women of high social rank stealing away from London to test the abilities of this cook," said the blind man. "And I've never heard of one going away disappointed."

Reggie nudged Sadie in the ribs.

"I'm always out to pick up ideas, kid," he said. "Somehow I feel that this is one."

"It was a chain of hot-dog wagons you wanted out West," said Sadie. "If this is the English substitute it goes with me, chief."

At eight o'clock the following morning, Carol was whistling a melody outside The House With the Golden Windows. The little party set out on its journey in quest of a perfect meal. There were Sir Thomas, Harold, Reggie, and Hogan. Sir Thomas wasn't keen about Hogan accompanying them until it flashed across his mind that in the company he was likely to meet in the hotel it might increase the value of his stock if he had his "man" to order about.

Blind Carol was full of amusing anecdote that morning. He led the party across the Downs and into the weald. He made them marvel at the adroitness with which he found his way along sheep paths, over styles and gates, across ploughed fields and over brooks. There was a crisp wind blowing and tempers that had been rasped for days became equable and sweet.

At the end of an hour Sir Thomas was exchanging Indian reminiscences with Hogan, and Harold was humming one or two army songs that had drifted back to memory. Reggie was making rough calculations of the profits that might arise from small, artistic, well-managed hotels in obscure country places which motorists could reach within an hour's run from London. He recalled a remark by Mr. Hiram Jolson during an altercation in Philadelphia about pride and art and all the rest of it. Mr. Jolson had said: "If you want to make money in this life there is no better way than to engage in the trade of supplying food to the

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

masses. The people will need to eat long after they have put art aside." Quite right, thought Reggie. It was a good basis on which to build his plans.

On, on! They discussed life in general and all those little intimacies that make men happy in each other's company. They were in magnanimous mood: they appraised the magic of field and tree and cloud-flecked sky. They admitted to each other, rather shame-facedly, that while it wasn't the beginning and end of life, good food, or the promise of it, did constitute much of that which we call joy.

Mile after mile. Following in the wake of the sightless wonder. Striding along, vigorous, hopeful, expectant, lips parted to inhale the tonic of the wind, arms swinging manfully by the side, leaping ditches after the manner of cross-country runners, struggling through hedges, bandying jests and just taking hold of life in huge armsful.

Hour after hour! Then they began to ask questions of Blind Carol who appeared to be as fresh as when he set out. Where was this hotel? When did they strike the high-road that should take them to it?

"Not far, now," said Carol, halting to cock his head on one side and take his direction from the wind. "I know it's a good walk, but you will be amply repaid for it."

Hogan, a bit of a philosopher himself, chewed a blade of grass to moisten his mouth and remarked that he was sorry he hadn't tried to tackle a little bacon at breakfast, bad though it was, before he left the camp.

Sir Thomas said he wished he had brought a biscuit or two with him; he had no idea that the hotel was so far away.

Blind Carol was sensitive to the reproach. He stopped in his walk to say that he was sorry if he had given them a wrong impression about distance: he, himself, didn't mind if he had to walk ten miles should

BLIND CAROL, HAPPY PHILOSOPHER

there be a perfectly good meal awaiting him at the end of the journey.

"Quite right," said Reggie. "I hate ingratitude."

"Absolutely," said Harold, faintly, "but I'm devilishly hungry all the same."

"You're certain that you haven't missed your way?" said Sir Thomas.

"I never do that," said Blind Carol. "Even a fog cannot baffle me."

"Can anything baffle you?" asked Harold.

"Only snow," said Carol. "Snow deadens the earth so that there is no vibration to guide us—we unsighted people. I don't like snow."

"I could eat even snow," said Hogan desperately.

Carol halted abruptly again.

"You're not accustomed to long walks," he said. "If you feel that you can't keep on for another three or four miles we'll stop at a village inn and take the edge off the hunger."

"Excellent," said Sir Thomas. "Do you know of one in these parts?"

Blind Carol did. "The Shepherd's Crutch" lifted itself out of a clump of trees like a beacon. They made for it at the double. It was a tumble-down, worm-eaten old inn with nothing like "Welcome" written on its façade. The windows were blocked with dusty advertisements of whisky and beer. They didn't look at the windows. They passed into the tap-room with its sanded floor and the foetid smell of the previous night's debauch among the rustics. The table was stained with the "rings" of beer glasses, spittoons were still full of match-sticks and foul sawdust. They didn't care a hang about that. All the same Harold thought they might as well leave the door open to let the morning breeze rush in. When the landlady appeared in response to Reggie's knocking on the bar counter, Sir Thomas looked quickly away from her. The face was deeply wrinkled, and she had not completed her toilet,

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

since wisps of greying hair fell over her corrugated forehead. Her hands were not clean and she didn't appear to be well pleased that the party should have condescended to call on her at that hour.

Carol apologized for so disturbing her. He ordered a tankard of ale and a morsel of bread and cheese for each one. He smiled as he sat back in his chair. "Not too much," he said to the others, gently, "or you'll spoil your appetite."

But that amber ale was elixir. There was just that saucy snap and bite in the cheese that provoked the appetite. Hogan wondered aloud if the old lady had in her cupboard anything resembling a jar of pickles? and, oh, if the Blessed Saints could conjure up a new loaf of brown bread.

"The devil take you," said Sir Thomas, irritably. "Why put that into my head?"

The landlady found a stone jar that held about six pounds of crisp pickled onions, and—miracle of miracles!—she had two new loaves of brown bread. And a second round of tankards was ordered and they ate and ate and quaffed and quaffed and extolled the virtues of the unclean old woman who had served the repast. And Sir Thomas insisted that he could empty even a third tankard, and if the company was agreeable he might sing them an old hunting song.

An hour fled and they were still in the inn.

Then Reggie said to Blind Carol:

"Where did you say this hotel of yours lay? I'm not sure that I could eat my money's worth even if we got to the place."

And Blind Carol laughed softly before replying:

"You're in the hotel now. 'Tis the only one I know of where a man with a jaded palate and a tongue like the bottom of a parrot's cage may be cured of his malady."

"It was the long walk that did it," said Reggie, and laughed with the sightless.

"That's a matter of opinion," said Blind Carol.

CHAPTER XXV

NIGHT AND THE STARS

CARAVANS that pass in the night !
Clinkety-clank ! Clinkety-clank !

The rhythmic lurching and swaying of painted, canopied houses on wheels. The twinkling of lantern lights. The nodding figures of somnolent drivers. The musical clinking of swinging buckets. The stealthy tread of lurcher beneath the protecting carriage.

Stars watching the sleepy earth and lighting romance on its way. Clean winds helping the nomads along.

Clinkety-clank ! Clinkety-clank ! On to the fair !
Anywhere !

Horses dozing as they heave and heaving as they doze.

Travelling through the long night to be ready to greet the dawn when the rose and orange and amber shall splash the eastern horizon with the joyous frenzy of an artist inspired.

Sleeping men and women—and a wakeful maid. And out of the night a whisper of Romance. A scrawl on a scrap of paper slipped by unseen hand through an open window.

“When the spring shall come again !”

“On the Road ! On the Road !
On the long grey rolling Road
With the blue sky above
And the wind that I love
And a fond heart to lighten my load.
Do I envy a king on a throne of gold ?
Do I envy the birds on high ?
Do I ask for more ? Do I sigh for more ?
Not I ! Not I ! Not I !”

Clinkety-clank ! Clinkety-clank ! On to the fair !
Anywhere !

And the maid smiles back at the stars.

CHAPTER XXVI

HUNTING THE BIG MONEY

THE "Treasury" of the Shadd Rowe Merrie England Fair Company would have gladdened the heart of a London theatre manager. Economy and well-nigh perfect organization had achieved wonders in an incredibly short space of time. What was the form of entertainment they offered? Simple and delightfully old-fashioned. In one tent Marie the Fat and Clarence Fitzherbert ran a modern version of the Penny Gaff—lurid melodrama that bordered on burlesque. Most of the party took a hand in presenting the plays, which were mainly authored by Sadie and Harold. Local colour was a valuable asset; a tilt at the Parish Council went down with all the relish of thirty or forty years ago. There was an improvement on the old "cock shy". The caricatured heads of political leaders were set on poles and at three shots a penny the local could smash the features of the politician he most disliked. Vigour was imparted to the thrower by trite little placards placed above the heads, such as "He voted against old-age pensions at forty! The swine! Paste him!" Or, "He would stop the working-man's beer! Sock him twice!"

A similar sideshow, and equally old, coined money. Two living negroes thrust their heads through a hole in a canvas sheet and allowed balls to be hurled at them at three shies for twopence. If business became slack, Reggie doubled the wages of the hard skulls and gave the public the option of throwing hefty sticks instead of rubber balls. Even benign and elderly clergymen showed their appreciation of this concession to the primitive.

HUNTING THE BIG MONEY

Aunt Agatha ran a small and innocuous circus designed for children. With half a dozen dogs, a couple of goats, a few intelligent cats and two foxes, she put up an entertainment that never failed to show a substantial profit.

The old-time boxing booth will never lose its grip on the affections of the public. Harold and Hogan worked this between them, since Reggie was now preoccupied as manager of the whole concern. Here, again, local prejudices were exploited. Working as an advance manager, or publicity hound, Hogan visited the taverns in the district, discovered the existence of minor feuds, interviewed the parties concerned and fixed up those hell and brimstone "needle" fights that are so acceptable to a peace-loving community. The fights were staged in the Shadd Rowe tent, the price of admission was small, and the "purse" to the victor generally consisted of a signed photograph of Marie the Fat or a garter which was said to have been worn by a famous film star. (The sex interest in country places, Reggie discovered, was more pronounced than in the towns. As Harold said, they had little else to think about.)

Among the other members of the company were "turns" that had drifted to the road from the vaudeville stage at the behest of "talkies". A snake charmer, a juggler, a female impersonator, three or four freaks, and a card manipulator.

The great idea moving in Reggie's mind was the presentation of local pageants. He was aware of the colossal conceit that stirs the very soul of a county family. He urged Sadie and Harold to put their heads together, dig out some fantastic legend and fix it on whatever locality they were visiting. The cost to the company would be negligible, as the performers would be the residents themselves, and they would be expected to provide their own costumes. Reggie thought they might start a chain of these pageants working during the winter and the spring, Marie Kordinski and Mr.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Buggs could rehearse them in turn, and during the summer the whole of the county could have a regular orgy of outdoor pantomime—for it was pantomime rather than pageantry from which the bright lad hoped to draw fat receipts.

Pageantry was not the limit of Reggie's ambitions. The Great Dream that dated from the evening when Mr. Buggs and Marie joined them on Worplesdon Common was a vast circus that should rival the combination of Barnum or the Ringling Brothers. Theatres and cinemas might come and go, but the circus would go on through the ages, he reasoned. He was learning his business in the running of this old English Fair, he told Sadie, but——

"I'm after the Big Money, kid," he said. "Hungering in the States taught me the value of money."

Indirectly, it was through the medium of this pageant idea of his that he brought the Great Dream within measurable distance of realization. There was nothing fraudulent in that which he did; there was nothing miraculous about it; and any young man whose wits had been sharpened by poverty might have achieved a similar success.

This was the last incident of the year before Sir Thomas and Lady Shadrow went into winter quarters. They had left Lewes and were back in the west of the county. Around the camp fire the principals discussed the pageant idea at length. Reggie was most insistent that history should be burlesqued from beginning to end. Sir Thomas was highly indignant that his son should have so little respect for tradition. He was countered with the reminder that tradition and county families had done precious little for him in the hour of trouble.

Sadie said she thought that if she could get a film corporation interested in the project, especially an American film company, they might write a few scenarios that would tickle Broadway to death.

HUNTING THE BIG MONEY

"Your English companies," she said, "have no sense of humour. They'd try to make a film true to their conception of dignity and fact, and the only laugh we'd get out of it would be the dead seriousness of it."

Sir Thomas stroked his beard thoughtfully. He rather funked an encounter with Sadie on this question of British prestige and tradition, but there were times when he felt that it would be a kindness to enlighten her on certain points.

"The signing of Magna Charta *was* a serious and a most impressive epic in British history," he said. "Imagine the scene at Runnymede. King John, proud, yet compelled to recognize the strength of those who dictated, reaching for the pen that should——"

"Yeah," said the incorrigible, "that's okay, but the English director would sweat his heart out seeing that old man John had his crown set at the right angle, and sure as death he'd forget the custard pie."

"Pie, Sadie?"

"Sure, Sir Tom! Somebody's got to sock him in the eye with a pie just as he's signing the cheque, or whatever it was he signed."

"I thought we were in serious conference," said Sir Thomas, loftily, and fell into silence.

"Sadie's right, up to a point," said Reggie. "The whole idea falls flat if we even dreamed of putting on an exact picture of what the historians have described. The people don't want to be educated up to history. They want to laugh. And if there's nobody else to laugh at, why, let 'em laugh at themselves."

"There should be a moral even in clowning," said Sir Thomas, severely.

"I'd give 'em all the morals they asked for if they'd pay the price," said Sadie. "Are we in this enterprise for glory, or just plain dough?"

"Dough," said Reggie, emphatically.

"Dough," said Aunt Agatha, emphatically.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Dough," said Marie the Fat, and she was more emphatic than any of them.

Sir Thomas gave his sister a reproachful look—a regular, Caesarian *Et tu, Brute*, look. And he murmured, abstractedly :

"How stout you are becoming, again, my dear."

Aunt Agatha displaced from her calf a flea that Wung, the Peke, had left in her charge.

"If I don't object to carrying a little fat about with me," she said with acerbity, "I don't see that it's your business to worry, *Father Christmas* !"

"And, alas, so coarse ! So coarse !" murmured Sir Thomas, addressing nobody in particular.

"To business," said Reggie, impatiently. "Do your quarrelling outside the council chamber."

"I don't seek a quarrel," said Aunt Agatha, elevating her chin and dilating her nostrils.

"Nor I, Aggie," said Sir Thomas, rising and bowing with exaggerated gallantry. "By the way, my dear, that delightful little monkey of yours misbehaved itself in my tent while I was out this morning. Will you see to it ?"

"To—*what* ?" said Aunt Agatha.

"You might exercise a little care. Don't you think so, my dear ?"

"Was it the monkey or I that went into your wretched tent, Tom ?"

"The monkey, my dear. Haven't I said so already ?"

"Very well, then, address your remarks to the monkey. It will not be flattered by the fact that I have given it your name."

Sadie broke into the quarrel.

"I like this pageant idea, Reggie," she said, "but is there sufficient money in the country ? People are saying that they're broke to the wide world, that the Chancellor has robbed them of every penny they possessed, that they can't sleep o' nights thinking of how they're going to face the tradesmen on the morrow."

HUNTING THE BIG MONEY

"My dear Sadie," said Reggie, "there never was a county gentleman so poor that he couldn't find the money with which to ape an ancestor at some dam' silly pageant."

"Go ahead," said Sadie. "You're the top dog in this joint."

"To-morrow," said Reggie, "I begin my inquiries. You shall come along with me and I'm satisfied that you will fall in with my views after you have met Sir Lacey Mildew, of Tappertit Castle."

There fell a silence. What was this new move in the brain of the irrepressible?

Sir Thomas coughed weakly behind his hand.

"Do I know this gentleman?" he asked tentatively.

"I don't think so," said Reggie. "I haven't seen him myself, but I'm making his personal acquaintance to-morrow. I had a long talk with a local reporter this morning and hinted that we were thinking of doing a pageant in the late spring."

"He referred you to—to this gentleman, Sir Lacey Mildew?" said Sir Thomas, feeling an inrush of the old dignity as he mouthed the rank. "I remember how the editor of the weekly newspaper used to beg me to receive his representative on any matter of social importance."

"Oh, yes," said Reggie, the old hard look coming into his eye. "The local reporter was certain that Sir Lacey would receive me eagerly. 'He's a musty old fool who lives in the past,' he said, 'but I dare say you'll be able to knock some intelligence into his nut.'"

"And this Castle?" said Sir Thomas, ignoring the spiteful remark.

"About six miles from where we're camped," said Reggie.

"One of England's historic piles, maybe?"

"Four or five hundred years old, I believe," said Reggie. "Glorious woods and sequestered walks. You know the sort of thing?"

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"If Sir Lacey is like thousands of other county gentlemen in England, he's sitting on the hard, cold stones of poverty; he hasn't a bean, not a cent, and he's either got to sell that castle or live on the moss that's growing out of the cracks in the walls."

Sadie was sincere when she said with a sigh :

"What a tragedy."

"Tragedy be damned," said Reggie, vigorously. "They've had their time; I suppose they've served their purpose although I can't give it a name. Now, they've got to move out of the way and give the traders elbow-room."

"Traders, Reggie. Would you turn your nobility into grocers? Would you give the ghost of little Napoleon the satisfaction of knowing he was right when he called you a nation of shopkeepers?"

"Boloney, Sadie! Boloney! Trade's the thing. What's good enough for the heir to the throne of England ought to be good enough for the rest of us."

"Speed on, big boy."

"Sir Lacey must find a buyer for Tappertit Castle or take to the high-road. 'I'll give you the whole 'works' before we go to see him. Don't ask me questions now: my mind's dancing a two-step. That big idea came with a wallop. But I'll tell you this much: one of your countrymen has been inquiring about this same castle."

In the late afternoon of the following day, Reggie, Sadie, Harold, and Sir Thomas, drove to Tappertit Castle in order, ostensibly, to lay before the owner their proposal for a local pageant in which they hoped he would interest himself.

When they reached the remote village they learned that the castle was a mile further on and situated in the heart of wooded country. They made inquiry of the landlord of the inn, "The Tappertit Arms". He was a short, squat man, with side-whiskers which seemed to have been stuck on his fat leathery cheeks in a spirit

HUNTING THE BIG MONEY

of mischief. He eyed them with typical Sussex suspicion—bequeathed from those smuggling days.

"Sir Lacey 'e don't hold wi' people makin' a show place of his grounds," he said. "Mighty particular, 'e be." He was looking fixedly at Sir Thomas as though he scented some ulterior motive in the wish to visit the castle.

"We are not bailiffs," said Harold austerely.

"I know that," said the landlord. "If you was you'd know your way up there without asking me."

"Does Sir Lacey own this inn?"

"No, the brewers own it."

"Who are the brewers?"

"Gentlemen," said the landlord. "Leastways they don't ask impudent questions."

"Thank you," said Harold. "I'm sorry if I have said anything that doesn't quite please you. Now, one last question."

"Who asked you to ask me these questions?"

"Let me explain," said Reggie, irritably. "We wish to see Sir Lacy Mildew and ask him certain questions."

"Look," said the landlord. He gave his mutton-chop whiskers an affectionate stroke. "If you want to know anything about Sir Lacey, go to the post-office and ask Mr. Toddlepin to tell you all about him. Mr. Toddlepin is the postmaster. He can talk, 'e can."

"Really"—from Harold.

"And he's eddicated," said the landlord, decisively, even proudly.

"Friend of yours?" said Harold.

"No, friend of Sir Lacey. Mr. Toddlepin is on the parish council. Vice-chairman, he be. And Sir Lacey is the chairman."

"Good enough," said Harold. "Where does this man dwell?"

"In Sussex," said the landlord, truculently. He didn't like the look of any of them.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"We'll go to the post-office," said Reggie. "Why waste time on Boniface?"

"What's wrong with me face?" asked the landlord. He pushed back the right sleeve of his coat.

"Everything," said Harold, wearily. "*Must* you wear those dreadful whiskers?"

"Harold," whispered Sir Thomas, nervously.

"They're my whiskers," said the landlord.

"They're not healthy," said Harold. "Mice may nest in them."

They walked away, leaving the landlord debating in his mind whether it wouldn't be wise to advise Sir Lacey in some way that a party of lunatics intended to call on him.

Sir Thomas was highly indignant with Harold.

They reached the post-office, where they found Mr. Toddlepin, the vice-chairman of the parish council, serving a customer with pickled onions: the customer had brought her own jar and Mr. Toddlepin was ladling out the order from a sort of earthenware tank. The post-office had its place behind a small wire screen at the back of the shop.

Very impressive was Mr. Toddlepin. Sir Thomas had followed Reggie and Harold into the shop, but he retraced his steps to the open doorway, having no prejudices in favour of the conglomeration of smells. Every known commodity was packed into that small shop, and the hams, hanging from the blackened ceiling, appeared to be as old as "The Tappertit Arms".

Mr. Toddlepin was the choicest thing there. Sadie made a mental note: Here was a character that must not be left out of any pageant they might organize. He was a man of middle age, hollow-checked and throbbing with a sense of his own importance. He affected an extraordinarily large moustache which gushed out from the lip and dropped like a dark waterfall over his mouth. He was wearing a dirty-white linen apron over a closely-buttoned lounge coat, the

HUNTING THE BIG MONEY

wrist-bands of which were turned back to give freer play to the hands that jumped from cheese and butter to postage stamps and dog licences. And on his head was cocked a bowler hat about two sizes too small for him.

Mr. Toddlepin removed the apron and dodged behind the wire screen of the post-office the instant the little party entered the shop. He had read of "hold-ups" in country places, and to his certain knowledge there was fifteen or sixteen shillings belonging to the Government in the till. He kept the hat in position; indeed, he didn't remove it during the whole of the conversation that followed.

Sadie urged Reggie to do the interviewing this time and to treat the vice-chairman with dignity.

"We are desirous," said Reggie, "of calling on Sir Lacey Mildew, at the castle, and we gather that you, sir, are the only person in the village who can assist us."

The bowler hat dipped in acknowledgment and settled back into position. But Mr. Toddlepin didn't speak: he waited for more.

"We have a business proposition to place before Sir Lacey," said Sir Thomas.

The bowler hat said: "I've heard that before."

Harold remarked, casually, that Tappertit Castle was rather famous for a huge battleaxe, known as "Simeon's Mite"; he had heard, he said, that it was still preserved within the castle: it was used by a warrior in the time of Stephen, or some other king. Harold said all this with the object of conveying to Mr. Toddlepin the impression that they were archaeologists well entitled to view the historic splendours of the place. It occurred to him that the first impression taken was that they had called to prosecute him for selling doubtful food.

Mr. Toddlepin listened to Harold, pondered the remark that had been made, leaned slightly forward, and came back at him with this:

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"The implement is still within the precincts of the castle, but its precise nomenclature has not been handed down to us. True, it is known to us as 'Simeon's Mite', and scholars are agreed that the name does no injury, either overt or covert, to historical verity."

It was an eighteen-pounder! It was a cataclysmic battering-ram!

Reggie fell back against Sadie; Sadie fell back against Harold; and Harold fell back against his father.

The bowler hat indulged a self-satisfied wriggle, got back into position and said: "Take it out of that."

Mr. Toddlepin served a customer with two penny-worth of boiled ham, a tin of blacking, and a mouse trap while the Shadrow party was recovering its breath.

The ice being broken, or the barrage having ceased, they found Mr. Toddlepin to be a mine of local information. Apparently, he was Sir Lacey's leaning-post, his guide, his slave. Sir Lacey inspired him with reverence. Sir Lacey always consulted him on matters of local importance. Sir Lacey did him the honour of receiving him at the castle when others were not even tolerated within the grounds.

He accompanied them to Tappertit Castle, and left them in the drive while he went forward to inquire if Sir Lacey Mildew was likely to be interested in pageantry and would extend to them the privilege of meeting him.

While they waited in the drive, Reggie looked about him.

"Sadie! Smell anything?"

"Smell? What?"

"Poverty," said Reggie.

The drive was covered with weeds, the flower-beds were desolate; here and there the walls of the castle had fallen away, the stones lying on the ground where they had dropped. There was no sign of a gardener, and later, when they entered the castle, there was no domestic servant to be seen.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Sir Lacey came to the hall steps to greet them. Mr. Toddlepin stood respectfully just behind him, the bowler hat in his hand now, giving air to a peculiarly-shaped dome that was as bald as a peeled potato.

There was charm in the presence of Sir Lacey—that useless sort of charm that goes with wax flowers in glass cases. He was between sixty and seventy, white-haired, clean-shaven and preposterously alert. Mr. Toddlepin had told him about the pageant idea and it had inflamed his imagination, even as Reggie had said. He welcomed them into the castle: they sat in the baronial hall—empty, dreary, musty, but historical. He talked in dignified tones about—nothing. He didn't belong to the present age. He was unacquainted with events of the day, but once he got going on the topic of pageantry he was so loquacious that Sir Thomas felt deep pity for him.

Again and again, Sir Lacey would stop to turn to Mr. Toddlepin and seek confirmation of a statement. The Shadrows could well understand that the meetings of the parish council were thrilling affairs with Sir Lacey in the chair and Mr. Toddlepin his staunchest supporter. Even in the conversation that ensued, Mr. Toddlepin brought to it the atmosphere of the village senate.

"Tappertit Castle holds a position that is unique in history. What do you say, Mr. Toddlepin?"

"I have great pleasure in seconding that, Sir Lacey," said Mr. Toddlepin, with profound gravity.

"King John himself passed a night under its roof. Need I say more than that, Mr. Toddlepin?"

"*Verb sap*," said Mr. Toddlepin solemnly.

"A pageant! A glorious historical pageant. I cannot imagine anything more desirable in these days. Can you, Mr. Toddlepin?"

"I associate myself with all you say, Sir Lacey."

"It might well rouse the people of the country from

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

the deplorable lethargy into which they have fallen. Yes, Mr. Toddlepin?"

"Carried, *nem. con.*," said Mr. Toddlepin.

"Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes." The voice of Sir Lacey became dreamy; he was staring at nothing.

Harold caught Reggie's eye and by stroking his nose down one side intimated that he hadn't a high opinion of Sir Lacey's mentality.

"We must call a parish meeting, Mr. Toddlepin," said Sir Lacey.

"Certainly," said Mr. Toddlepin. "Date?"

"Immediately! Why not?"

"Why not?" said Mr. Toddlepin.

Here, Reggie thought it opportune to mention that Sir Lacey would be expected to find a little money to start the fund. A matter of a couple of thousand, he suggested casually.

Sir Lacey said, "Oh, yes." Then, again, "Oh, yes. Make a note of that, Mr. Toddlepin, will you? About a couple of thousand." He stopped. His gaze lifted to the oaken beams of the baronial hall. He smiled rather wistfully. "One of my ancestors financed his king on a memorable occasion," he said. Again, he paused. Then: "I must read up the character that I shall impersonate in the pageant," he said. "There was 'Simeon,' of course. You will have read of his mighty battleaxe?"

"I mentioned it to Mr. Toddlepin," said Harold. "What exactly is the legend surrounding the weapon?"

Sir Lacey's lips began to move, his eyes seemed to be resenting something that was goading them from behind.

"Mr. Toddlepin, what is the legend?"

Mr. Toddlepin placed a hand on his thigh and said:

"When Simeon was dying he threw the axe from his window and instructed his friends to bury him where the axe should fall."

Sadie's lower jaw dropped.

HUNTING THE BIG MONEY

"One minute," she said, with less tact than ever she had displayed in the past, "I'm writing a book on this county and I don't want to get it all cluttered up with axe-throwing. Aren't you mixing up this legend with the story they told me at Arundel? Wasn't it Bevis of Hampton who hurled his axe or sword, called 'Morglay', from the battlements and told them to dig his grave where it alighted? And didn't it fall at Pugh Dean, half a mile from the castle?"

Sir Lacey appeared to be deeply hurt. He looked at Mr. Toddlepin, and Mr. Toddlepin looked up at the oaken rafters of the baronial hall.

"Who was Bevis of Hampton, Mr. Toddlepin?" Sir Lacey asked disdainfully.

"Who, indeed?" said Mr. Toddlepin.

"And—and where is Arundel?"

"Ah! Where is Arundel?" said Mr. Toddlepin.

"And, then," said Sadie, "there was Robin Hood. He shot an arrow from his sick-room, and——"

"I do not recall having met Mr. Robin Hood," said Sir Lacey coldly. He turned to Reggie. "I would like to discuss the matter of that two thousand with you," he said. "Will you come with me to the library?"

They all followed him out of the baronial hall. Reggie remarked a peculiarity. Whenever Sir Lacey opened a door he stepped slightly to one side and held the door open for something or somebody to pass over the threshold. In the old gentleman's temporary absence, Mr. Toddlepin explained to them that Sir Lacey had loved nothing so much as a King Charles spaniel that never left his side during the sixteen years of its life. When it died, he could not bring himself to believe that it had been taken from him; and now, it was fixed on his brain that the ghost of the animal still followed wherever he might go.

In the library, Sir Lacey appeared to pull himself out of the musty past and take a firm grip of the present.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

He drew Reggie and Sir Thomas aside so that the others should not overhear.

"Two thousand," he said, and sighed. "To be quite frank with you, my dear sir, I was hoping that I might make a little out of this pageant you propose holding. I am a very poor man."

Reggie's face showed disappointment.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Sir Lacey," he said. "You have a magnificent place here?"

"Ah! Yes, yes. A beautiful place. Now, if I could sell it!"

"Would you sell it?" Reggie asked.

"It is in the hands of a firm of agents," said Sir Lacey, "but they tell me that it is almost ridiculous to expect to sell it. There was an American gentleman here some weeks ago. He wanted to buy, I believe, but he couldn't quite grasp the significance of the historical value of the place."

"Give me the name of your agents, Sir Lacey," said Reggie.

"Gravell and Grint," said Sir Lacey. "Mr. Toddlepin will give you their address."

"I suppose you cannot give me the name of the American who thought of buying it?"

"On principle—no."

"There's no likelihood of his making an offer?"

"The agents say they don't think it likely."

"These grounds would make a lovely setting for a pageant," said Reggie.

Sir Lacey didn't appear to be irritated by the evasion.

"Yes, lovely," he said. "I must read up the history concerning 'Simeon'. I don't think it would be above my capabilities. I suppose it wouldn't be necessary for me to throw that axe very far?"

"Not very far," said Reggie distantly. His mind wasn't concerned with "Simeon". It was working like a motor along a new line.

Harold and Sadie rejoined them.

HUNTING THE BIG MONEY

"We will take the liberty of calling again, Sir Lacey," said Reggie, "when we have progressed a little further with our scheme for the pageant."

"Honoured—charmed," said Sir Lacey. He tilted his head and looked at Mr. Toddlepin. "Anything more on the agenda?"

"Nothing more, Sir Lacey."

"The meeting is closed," said Sir Lacey. He bowed to the company, walked to the door of the library, held it open for that ghostly dog to pass across the threshold with him, and left it to Mr. Toddlepin to see the visitors off the premises.

Sir Thomas, Mr. Toddlepin, and Harold walked ahead; Reggie and Sadie followed at a respectful distance.

"Sadie?"

"Big Boy?"

"We're going to get a 'break' that will take away your breath."

"I'm listening, honey."

"And I'm thinking—thinking hard, Sadie. Maybe I shall buy that castle."

And Sadie, equally enthusiastic, smiled as she replied:

"I don't think I shall sell it, boy."

CHAPTER XXVII

A GAMBLE IN PROPERTY

IN the private office of the senior partner in Gravell and Grint, estate agents, Reginald the Fool of the Family figuratively rolled up his sleeves and reached out to grasp the Big Chance for which he had been waiting some years. He had trained for this encounter. Before he entered the office, and after a long talk with Sadie, he took hold of sentiment and gave it a twist of the neck.

"Now, Mr. Gravell," said he, "let's cut away all the trimmings and get to the meat. Tappertit Castle is in the market?"

Mr. Gravell hadn't put through a deal in property for a long while. Like everybody else in business he was beginning to wonder if the Bankruptcy Court was as dreary a place as some people would have him believe.

"Yes, sir," he said, "and if you don't happen to be in love with Tappertit I can give you orders to view half a dozen other country mansions, and even a castle or two."

"One is sufficient to go on with," said Reggie. "What's the price, freehold?"

"Twenty thousand pounds," said Mr. Gravell. "There must be two hundred acres of glorious pasture and woodland."

"Do you know of anybody in their senses who would give you twenty thousand for the place?"

"Look at its history."

"What does a Labour Government care about historical associations when it levies taxes?"

"Taxation has reached its limit," said Mr. Gravell.

"So *you* may think. I *know*."

A GAMBLE IN PROPERTY

"Are you prepared to make an offer, sir?"

"There's no question about Sir Lacey being desirous of selling?"

"He must sell," said the agent.

"And if it is put up in the open market you can take it from me that you will not be able to give it away."

"Then why do you wish to *buy* it?" said Mr. Gravell.

"I haven't said that I wish to buy it," said Reggie.

"Twenty thousand pounds. I could put my money into a thousand profitable concerns: why fling it away on a worm-eaten old castle that isn't quite habitable? Who could afford to run it?"

"The Americans are still interested in old English estates," said Mr. Gravell. "We have had inquiries."

"Give me the name of one man—an American who has been to see the place."

Mr. Gravell hesitated. Then he mentioned no less a person than Mr. Hiram Jolson, father of Sadie. The sky, for Reggie, became a flaming mass of glory in that moment. Yet, he dissembled with the art of a villain in a stock melodrama.

"Did he make an offer?" he asked, superciliously.

"No, to be truthful, he didn't," said the agent. "He seemed to doubt the historical associations."

"Naturally," said Reggie. "You can't fool Americans easily. Was he thinking of buying it for himself?"

"No, I think he had a friend in mind."

"Exactly," said Reggie, "and I need hardly inquire if he has taken the trouble to write to you since he saw the place . . . Jolson? I seem to have seen that name in the newspapers lately. Yes, I'm certain of it. He was said to have purchased a place in the north. I don't know. I may be wrong. Now, twenty thousand, Mr. Gravell! Think again."

"Make an offer, sir."

"I'm not buying *and* selling," said Reggie. "Do you know of anyone who would give you fifteen thousand for the place?"

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Frankly, no. Not with the market in its present condition."

"My dear sir, money is so 'tight' that ten thousand is a figure that would frighten away a millionaire. You just can't say what the Government is going to do next."

"Will you make an offer of ten thousand?" asked Mr. Gravell. "Let me take something tangible to Sir Lacey."

"He needs money?"

"Badly. I have hinted as much."

"No, I'll not make an offer, but I'll take an option—an option for one fortnight—and the purchase price stands at ten thousand. Is it a deal?"

"I must consult my client," said Mr. Gravell, but his fingers were itching.

"I'll pay a hundred pounds for that option," said Reggie. He was aware of the magnetism of money, cash, crisp notes. A cheque, even a good one, may not excite an agent's emotions, but cash heats his blood. Reggie counted out one hundred pounds in five-pound notes. It represented a good slice of the profits in Shadd Rowe's Merrie England Fair, but it was the best gamble he had ever essayed in his life: Sadie had agreed on that point.

Mr. Gravell was impressed. He would see Sir Lacey that afternoon. What about references?

Reggie had seen to that. He gave him the names of a firm of lawyers in the next town: already he had communicated with them.

"See Sir Lacey without delay," he said, "or I may withdraw my offer. There are so many fine old places in the market that I feel I ought to look around a little more before making a definite offer for this place."

From the agents, Reggie went to the lawyers of whom he had spoken. They were instructed to draw up the agreement. He would give a hundred pounds for a fortnight's option to buy the castle, subject to contract, for ten thousand.

A GAMBLE IN PROPERTY

Then, back to Sadie.

"Step on the gas, kid," he said. "We've got to move speedily. You and Harold get to work on the history of that castle. Get a story into the newspapers, if you can, that a magnificent pageant is to be presented next summer wherein every historical incident connected with the famous castle will be faithfully reproduced. Get that into the 'papers, Sadie. Beg them to print it. Use all the grey matter in your head to concoct the right sort of story—the story that will pass a news-editor who has been bitten to death by publicity hounds. I'll attend to the rest."

"And the next move, Reggie?"

"I'm going to see an American gentleman in town," said Reggie darkly. "I can't give you his name just now, but I'm after him—right on his heels."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LIVE WIRE MAKES CONTACT

REGINALD THE FOOL developed the feverish activity of a mosquito during the next few days. The promise of making a substantial sum of money by a stroke of business that should be comparatively honest, put yards on his stride, as he told Sadie. He darted about the district, bellowed into telephone transmitters, ramped and raved and cajoled. He knew what he wanted and it irritated him if the rest of the world couldn't fathom his mind without having everything explained in detail.

And that elusive quality called Luck came around the corner, patted him on the back, and said, figuratively: "Boy, you'll get on. I like 'snap' in a fellow."

Then Reggie went to London metaphorically with a club in his hand. He left the affairs of the show in the care of Sadie and Harold. He said he wouldn't be away longer than twenty-four hours, and in his absence they could be thinking out a trip to the Continent where they might pick up some circus talent that would startle the old British Lion out of its sleep.

He didn't take Sadie fully into his confidence lest the fact that he intended to "sting" her father should arouse an epidemic of sentiment. He resolved to put through the deal without any interference from strangers or blood relations. It was an honest transaction: he repeated that fact to himself again and again to make certain that it was. No, not because he was so high-souled that he wouldn't have touched it if there had been anything shady about it. The fact that it was a business deal similar to thousands that took place every day among City men seemed to add to his

LIVE WIRE MAKES CONTACT

astuteness : it was like making bricks without straw : it was proof that he had brains.

The fateful conference took place in a private sitting-room of a Strand hotel. When he sent up his name to Mr. Hiram Jolson, Reggie wrote "tremendously important" across the slip of paper.

And Mr. Jolson being in the best of moods because of a cablegram that had just arrived advising him of a profitable speculation on Wall Street, said to the page-boy :

"Let him come right here, but let him walk up the stairs. Say the elevator's out of action."

He believed in making a young man stretch himself lest he should fall asleep on his way to breakfast.

The two met in the style of gladiators facing each other in the ring. Mr. Jolson, tall, massive, and hard-shelled, was standing with his back to the fireplace : his hands were clenched. There was an expression of pity on his expansive face—pity for anything remotely resembling a failure, a mollusc, a limpet.

Reginald's appearance must have confounded his expectations. The open life and healthy exercise had polished the face a delightful brown : there was a beautiful vigour and rhythm in every movement of the limbs. There was laughter in the eyes of the Fool, and there was a compelling note in his voice.

"I kinda fancied you would trail me," said Mr. Jolson condescendingly. "I thought I had only to stand back and give you all the rope you wanted and the rest was a certainty." He took an uncommonly fat cigar from his waistcoat pocket and gave the end a bite. "Well, how much do you want to borrow or beg ? Tell me that and then give me news of my foolish daughter. Is she starving, lying in hospital, knitting socks for a living, or playing waitress in a restaurant ?"

Reggie gave him a critical stare before replying.

"Mr. Jolson," he said, folding his arms and setting the right foot slightly in advance of the left (he loved

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

that pose), "as you happen to be in England—a privileged guest of this Government, if I may say so—let me warn you that it is highly dangerous to drink its hooch all day."

"Meaning—?" said Mr. Jolson, picking out with his eye the spot on Reggie's anatomy where his fist intended to land.

"That you talk as though you were 'corned', 'canned', or 'blotto'," said Reggie. "I came here expecting, hoping, to find a first-class specimen of a Wall Street business man."

Mr. Jolson laughed immoderately.

"Yeah, to borrow money from him," he said.

"Borrow nothing," said Reggie. "I came to put some easy money in his way."

"*You* put money in my way. Say, that's good."

"You have always believed me to be a sap."

"The belief has grown into solid conviction," said Mr. Jolson. "What that girl of mine could see in you beats me. Why she should consent to run away with you beats me again."

"She ran with me because it was her duty to do so," said Reggie.

"How come?" said Mr. Jolson.

"You would expect a *wife* to obey her husband, I suppose?"

Mr. Jolson nodded to imply that he wasn't taken by surprise.

"Oh, I found that out," he said, after a long pause. "Since I saw you last I've crossed the Atlantic twice. Why couldn't you tell me in the beginning that you were married in Philadelphia?"

"Why?" Reggie echoed. "Because you might have considered it your duty to make me a partner in your damned pig-sticking business. Now, let's call off this fight and get down to sound common sense. I'm here to show you that I have something besides blue

LIVE WIRE MAKES CONTACT

blood in me. I hear that you're still interested in a property known as Tappertit Castle?"

Mr. Jolson swung his cigar to the other corner of his mouth. He made no reply but his eyebrows hoisted themselves a trifle.

"I'm not going to ask your motives in trying to buy an old English castle," said Reggie, "and it wouldn't hurt my finer feelings to learn that it was your intention to start pig-rearing in the grounds of Tappertit. No, sir. I don't care what you intend to do with the place—what your friend intends to do with it."

"I've been trying to get Tappertit for a friend," said Mr. Jolson. "He's in the film business and might find it uncommonly useful. There you are. My cards are on the table. What do you know?"

"Why don't you buy the place?" Reggie asked.

"Because it isn't for sale," said Mr. Jolson. "I was down there yesterday."

"I heard about your visit," said Reggie.

"That's like your English business men," said Mr. Jolson. "They broadcast their secrets and whine because trade's bad."

"Who told you the castle wasn't for sale?" Reggie asked.

"The agents. They said a fellow had bought an option on it."

"Name?"

"They couldn't tell me any more than that a firm of lawyers acted for him."

"You could have sounded him to see if he wanted to sell again," said Reggie.

"The agents said he wouldn't sell. He had a big idea back of his head."

"Naturally," said Reggie. "That castle has one of the finest chapters in history written around it. Do you read the newspapers while you're here?"

"I read something about a pageant that was to be put on next year."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"And you can take it from me that the Yanks are looking out for that same pageant. They're going to film it. Every studio in Hollywood is nosing around. See the big idea? The Yanks *must* break in on this side. They've been accused of twisting and distorting English history; they're out to produce a film that won't stir the dust in the coffins of the historians. This castle has the story they know is full of 'meat'."

Mr. Jolson drawled: "You don't say. Well, the friend for whom I wished to buy the place is in celluloid."

"I know," said Reggie, darkly, "and he'll be a pretty sick man when he hears that Hiram Jolson, the go-getter, the pig prince, the Philadelphia Wonder, or whatever he calls himself, has been pipped on the post."

"Where's my daughter, Sadie?"

"Never mind your daughter," said Reggie. "I'm talking big money, which is more important. When I think of how she used to boost your stock I feel like a wife-beater."

"You've developed a deal of sauce since I saw you last, young man," said Mr. Jolson.

"You called me a sap. Do you remember that?"

"It's no strain on the brain to remember that fact," said Mr. Jolson.

"But if I put this deal through for you?"

"You!" Mr. Jolson said it as though he would be more credulous if the English newspapers came out at Christmas time without a picture of some fat old alderman mixing a pudding.

"I'm on this," said Reggie. "I can get hold of the man who has the option. I know what he's asking for the property."

"How much?"

"Twenty-five thousand pounds. And he doesn't know what a goldmine he's hanging on to."

"It's sure big money," said Mr. Jolson.

LIVE WIRE MAKES CONTACT

"Look here. Give me a chance to buy it for you."

"You!"

"Don't say 'you' like that again. If I could take your only daughter from under your very nose, marry her secretly, bring her to England and not tell a soul about the marriage, I'm not the sap you believe me to be."

"I might have made you a decent allowance if I'd known the facts."

"Pig profits don't interest me," said Reggie. "I may be a swine, as you called me to your friends when you heard of the elopement, but I hate pigs. I want to take on this commission for you. I want to show you that I'm all 'het up' on this business proposition. Come on, now, Yankee Doodle! What's your price for the castle?"

"Not twenty-five thousand," said Mr. Jolson.

"Good-bye," said Reggie. "I haven't time to waste on saps. I know another man who's interested."

"I'd go to twenty thousand for my friend, but not a cent over that," said Mr. Jolson.

"Give me the chance to buy it for you at twenty thousand! Give me the word that if I get it through for you at that figure you would take your hat off when I pass you in the street."

"Why should I?"

"In tribute," said Reggie. "You think I'm a fool; if I prove a better man than you at this buying game, you ought to take your hat off. I'm not certain that you shouldn't unbutton your braces. Come on, now! Give me, and give Sadie your daughter and my wife, the chance to earn a little commission."

"I've said it," said Mr. Jolson.

Reggie took a spring across the floor and grabbed a sheet of the hotel notepaper.

"Write it down," he said. "Give it to me in writing that you'll pay twenty thousand for the castle, subject to contract, and I'll go ahead so fast you'll think I was the exhaust of a swallow."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

And Mr. Hiram Jolson did it! He wrote the letter.

"Get that for twenty thousand and I'll reconsider my opinion that you're a bigger fool than any we got back home."

"And, now," said Reggie, "I want your cheque for two thousand pounds—deposit! Let me have it in my hand so that I can force this fellow who holds the option."

"Who's been giving you lessons?" asked Mr. Jolson.

"Sadie," said Reggie shortly. "Better make that a banker's draft; money inspires a seller more than does a cheque."

It was done! Reggie went back to the south so quickly that his feet got hot, his radiator boiled over, and he very nearly seized up in his pistons. He said to his lawyers:

"I bought the castle for ten thousand: there's my deposit of one thousand—ten per cent! Complete the deal! Then, I sell, through you, for twenty thousand. Put that through. The work's done. I await your letter with cheque enclosed."

And as Reggie hurried out of the lawyers' office, half-eating, half-smoking a cigarette, one partner said to another:

"That fellow's a Yank. He knows what he wants, and he'll get it."

Why labour the subject? The deal was completed. Reginald the Fool made a little under ten thousand pounds on that transaction. Did he feel pangs of remorse? Did he go down on his knees and ask Heaven to forgive him for having soaked his wife's father? Did he bow in humility before the ghosts of the Shadrows and murmur that he had sinned against their dignity by indulging in business and putting it well and truly across the man who had sired the finest piece of femininity that had come to his notice? Like hell he did!

Sadie kissed him hard and affectionately on the lips when she heard the story and saw the acknowledgment

LIVE WIRE MAKES CONTACT

from the bank that nine thousand and something had been paid into the credit of Reginald Shadrow. She said :

"Kid ! If ever I hear of a vacancy going for a first-class Chancellor of the Exchequer, I'll wire you ! Boy, kiss me again. I knew when I saw you in that hot-dog wagon away back a thousand years, that you were the berries, and then some, if only you found the right woman to help 'em grow."

"I found her, all right," said Reggie.

There came a day when Mr. Hiram Jolson learned how his son-in-law had made a good thing out of the Tappetit Castle affair. Did he sally forth with a sword on his thigh and mustard sharpening up his tongue ? He grasped Reginald the Fool by the hand and said :

"Put it there ! You beat me to it ! If England can bring off one or two trade deals like that she can scrap her Navy and go to bed satisfied that nobody will dispute her might."

He said more. He took Reggie aside from the others and whispered in his ear :

"There must be hundreds of similar propositions lying around in this old country of yours. Keep your eyes skinned as you toddle around with that crazy circus of yours, make it your business to ask questions and to hell with that nonsense of waiting to be introduced. If you fancy that a mansion might be converted into a convalescent home or a fish-curing depot, slide in so quickly that the other fellow gets a pain in the neck watching your hoofs. Have your ideas ready, but above all things, have your buyer waiting for you to return from the vendor. Boy, once upon a time I called you a sap. I'll take that back, now. Go ahead ! If ever you should want a little capital to back a proposition of yours, pick up the nearest megaphone and bellow for Hiram B. That's me !"

Let the glad news be told now while the ink is hot. Reginald Shadrow was instrumental in disposing of

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

three large properties in the country before he left his father and mother with Phoebe in the winter quarters. He and Sadie talked long and earnestly with the bank manager who had charge of their finances. They picked their own investments, but they left the bank manager with the impression that before the winter of the following year got settled to its work, they would be running a combination of talent that wouldn't have its equal on the roads of Old England.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MAN, THE MAID, AND THE HOUR

FARMER'S HILL!

It lies to the west of the ancient village of Ifield, or Iveld, as it is called in Domesday Book.

The woods of oak, elm, beech and fir spread across the ridge of the hill—a glorious medley of colour and scents. They are the haunt of every British wild bird known to the ornithologist; rabbit, stoat, weasel and fox move through the undergrowth unmindful of the human life in the valley.

Away to the east lie the wooded slopes on the road to Horsham. Crawley Downs rise out of the morning mist and nod to Farmer's Hill. Higher up-country is Redhill, showing patches of chalk to the aeroplanes that sweep through the clouds.

There is deep and mystic silence within the woods on Farmer's Hill. There are glades wherein the elves and leprechauns weave fantastic patterns when the moon is high and the shadows of the firs are like quaint old dancing witches. The things of the wild creep close to the edge of the wood and look through the screen of blackberry and hawthorn at the sleepy village of Ifield. There are many fields between, but the wild seem never to venture beyond the fringe of the woods: it would be like passing from one world to another.

Many are the legends associated with Farmer's Hill, but you could not feel the beauty of them unless you wandered there in the dead of night, or when the eastern horizon is changing a hundred hues each second at the bidding of the rising sun. There are strange paths through the woods, leading to nowhere, and ending abruptly as though the walker had stopped, gazed and turned

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

back to the centre. There is one path that leads into the heart of Primrose Copse, north of the village of Ifield. It is a path that Cupid himself might have devised, for only lovers can find it. There is a tiny glade at the end of the path; the grass is always sweet and tender no matter what the season of the year. The magical aroma of bluebell, wild orchis, violet and primrose is concentrated in Lovers' Couch!

The story goes that Bonnie Prince Charlie and a lass of the village made this a trysting-place. It may be no more than a story, for there are very few woods in England in which the Royal outlaw didn't hide and make love. But spoil the story with doubt and dates and you may as well complete the fell work by destroying a few others with it. For instance, it is next to impossible to find a Sussex village in which William Penn didn't live or worship before sailing to America with his brother pilgrims. American visitors come nearly three thousand miles to see the church register in which Penn signed his name, and before they've been here a month they learn of so many other churches and places where he lived and preached and signed his name that they're compelled to take out papers of naturalization to make certain of doing the pilgrimage thoroughly. There should be a law to protect people against the humbug of tradition. However——

The Shadrows migrated to Farmer's Hill and obtained the permission of the lord of the manor to leave The House With the Golden Windows in the heart of the woods for the winter. They chose a glade which the very spirit of romance might have set aside for them. Two old projecting firs formed a natural gateway; viewed from the near distance, this gateway resembled the façade of an old cathedral. There was just sufficient room for the caravan to pass through the opening, and the branches fell together again in a homely, comforting, "rest, my children" sort of way.

Sir Thomas, Virginia, Phoebe and Hogan were to

MAN, MAID, AND THE HOUR

form the winter camp, but Reggie and Aunt Agatha accompanied them as far as the glade to see that they were comfortably settled. A second caravan was allotted since the weather in winter was not likely to allow of the use of sleeping tents.

Virginia kissed Aunt Agatha very tenderly when the time came to say good-bye.

"I shall always think of you as the wonder of the party," she said. "In the beginning, I was afraid that the life would be too much for you. Even now, I ask myself if it wouldn't be kinder on Reggie's part to settle you here with us till the spring comes."

Aunt Agatha shook her head.

"I hate leaving you, my dear," she said, "but the road life has eaten into my soul. It's you, Virginia, who have been the marvel."

Aunt Agatha was truer to herself—her new self—when she was seated by Reggie's side on the way back to join the show.

"Hibernate there for the winter!" snorted the widow of Lord Briskett. "How the hell would the show get along without me?"

Phoebe had accepted her brother's ruling with suspicious calm.

When the time came to bid farewell to Sadie, and set out for Ifield, she had clasped her arms around her neck and whispered: "Isn't life wonderful, Sadie, when you can look forward hopefully to what to-morrow may have in store for you?"

No word about Ricardo! But intuition means so much to a woman.

The winter was mild that year. Within the sanctuary of the woods, autumn seemed reluctant to take its leave and snowdrops were peeping timorously from under a coverlet of fallen russet leaves before those same leaves were completely withered.

Every morning, before breakfast, Phoebe walked to the edge of the wood to gaze into the distance where

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

the long white winding high-road made its way through the undulating country. Every evening she walked to the western edge to watch the sun go down.

When the lamps were lighted, the windows of the caravans glowed like kindly eyes—peaceful, happy eyes.

For Phoebe there was no atmosphere of loneliness, no silence that was depressing. Her ears were attuned to every sound of beast and bird. The rabbits had no fear of her as she passed through the bracken; the grey squirrels paused in their work of pillage to wink slyly and shake their feathered tails in friendly salute.

Very quietly and unostentatiously she went about her duties in and around the caravan. When her mother and father sat at the camp-fire of an evening she was content to sit near them and listen without taking part in the conversation.

Small and isolated parties do not become garrulous in order to defeat silence; they become silent themselves, methodical in their actions, memorizing tasks and customs so that it is unnecessary to speak.

In the night-time, there were sounds that would have startled them in the days when they lived closer to civilization: now, they assumed that it was the bark of a dog fox that broke on the hillside, or that the marauding wind had flung down a giant oak.

Then came the night when spring was hustling winter to its sleep and calling the life of the woods out of its dormancy. Sir Thomas paused in the work of net-making to throw up his head and listen intently.

"Thought I heard a rabbit scream," he said.

"Caught by a weasel, maybe," said Virginia.

"Or held in a snare," said he. "Did you tell Hogan not to set any snares, Phoebe?"

"Yes," she said, "I'll walk down to the fir plantation. It may be that a cat has been caught in the wire."

She took an oaken staff from the caravan and wandered away into the darkness of the woods. No fears or forebodings! No hesitancy! Nothing like nervousness!

MAN, MAID, AND THE HOUR

"Do you think she will ever go back to the old life, Tom?" Virginia said.

"Will any of us go back?" said he, and held up the finished net for her inspection.

"Beautifully made, Tom," she said, admiringly. "You become cleverer each succeeding day. Why, you're twice as useful as Hogan in a camp."

He rested his elbows on his knees and cupping his hands made a support for his chin.

"I dreamt, last night, that two strange men came through the woods and seized me," he said. "'Your freedom's ended,' they shouted. 'You must come back to prison.' They hauled me away from the caravan where you were lying asleep. They hoisted me into a motor-car and drove off at a tremendous speed. We came to a great building where a light showed in every window. 'It's a mad-house,' I said to myself. They hauled me out of the car and pushed and hustled me up thousands of stairs until I found myself in a carpeted room. The two men let go their hold of me and said, 'Did you think you could escape us?' I saw the door wasn't closed and made a dash for it, but they were on me like wild animals, and one said: 'We'd better put the chains on him.' It was a terrible time that followed, Virginia. I fought with all my strength, but they overpowered me. I was loaded with chains. I couldn't move my head. Then, the two men stepped back and surveyed me, and one said: 'Pleased to meet you, Sir Thomas Shadrow!' Then they disappeared, leaving me standing there with the chains heavy upon me. I managed to shuffle to a mirror that panelled the wardrobe in the room and—and what do you think were the chains that held me, Virginia? Nothing more than a stiff collar and a dress shirt!"

Virginia looked down at the hands he was now holding out in front of him.

"Tom," she said gently, "when last did you change your shirt?"

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"My dear!" he expostulated. "I know it's a trifle sticky at the cuffs, but—but I washed this one myself and thought I'd made a pretty good job of it until I saw Harold's. Now, Harold does know how to wash a shirt! Yes, I'll give the boy credit for that."

Along the dark, bramble-strewn path to Lovers' Couch, Phoebe went, her heart beating wildly, hopefully. Again and again, she halted to give a similar cry to that which her father had heard.

Then, the answering call was borne through the trees to her ears! She rushed forward, her arms held out, her heart bursting with the joy of it all.

"I said that I would come back to you in the spring."

"Oh, my love! My love!"

He set his lips on hers and took the breath from her young body. She wound her arms about his neck in passionate, joyous surrender.

"You never doubted that I would return, sweet maid?"

"Not for a moment, Ricardo."

"You love me still?"

"To me, Ricardo, you are life!"

"Dear one!"

A wood-pigeon rustled the tassels of a fir above their heads: they did not move from each other's embrace. He held her so that her lithe, sinuous body seemed to melt into his. He bore her gently to the fallen trunk of a tree and kissed her hair, her lips, her neck, her bosom. She ran her fingers through his hair and caught at it greedily, hungrily, lovingly, fearing that he might withdraw his lips from hers, fearing that modern reality might dissipate the joy of dreaming, the joy of the primitive, the joy of naturalness!

Lovers' Couch!

The wind crooned a love song through the tassels of the firs. The night was hung with stars that smiled

MAN, MAID, AND THE HOUR

in their gladness. A sleepy blackbird awoke in a nearby bush and called affrightedly to its mate, then lapsed again into silence, reassured by the answering flutter.

"Phoebe, my own?"

"Ricardo?"

"I want you for wife!"

"Mush, mush, mush," said the wind in the trees.

"Isn't-it-sweet? Isn't-it-sweet?" cried the blackbird startled out of its sleep.

"Let - the - world - laugh! Let - the - world - laugh!" chuckled the wood-pigeon overhead as he settled himself back on his perch.

"Phoebe, will you take the road with me?"

"Kiss me again, Ricardo, and I'll die with you."

She went back to The House With the Golden Windows—went slowly that she might disarm suspicion. Her father was already asleep; her mother called softly to her:

"Phoebe, my darling! Let me kiss you good night before I close my eyes. How drowsy I am!"

Phoebe leaned over the bunk and pressed her cheek against her mother's.

"There are tears on your cheek, my darling!"

"Tears of joy, mother."

"Good night, and pleasant dreams!"

"Good night, mother!"

She went out of the caravan and sat by the greying ashes of the camp-fire. She wrote a note—a short and simple note—and left it where her mother should find it on the morrow. The old elms and oaks seemed to lean forward to listen to the beating of her young heart. There was no movement in the undergrowth; there was great and solemn silence in the skies. Far across the valley a light showed in a cottage window; for a long while she watched that light; when it disappeared she rose silently, surveyed the camp with tenderness in her eyes, then turned her face to the west and stole along the path that should take her to the field.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

The caravan, standing in the roadway far down the slopes, could just be distinguished from the hill-top; then a lantern was waved to and fro. She went forward quickly. He met her half-way, picked her up in his arms and carried her the remainder of the distance.

No word was spoken. From a locker within the caravan he took a heavy, fleece-lined overcoat and wrapped it around her. He took his place in the driver's seat and she sat by his side. He called softly, persuasively to the two horses: they took the strain and the caravan moved forward.

Thus they travelled through the night. She asked no question of him, being content to lean against his stalwart figure; the mind, made active by the step she had taken, could not countenance sleep. She watched the amorphous hedgerows take shape at the bidding of dawn; when the rim of the sun showed over the eastern horizon, her eyes caught the glow.

Ricardo kissed her very tenderly, but still no word was uttered. She had some knowledge of the country they were traversing but evinced no desire to learn of his destination. He kept away from the high-roads and wove the caravan through country lanes where the hedges and overhanging branches of trees were drenched with the dew and scent of morning.

The flaming disc had climbed high above the horizon by the time they entered Ashdown Forest. Deftly he guided the horses along little-used tracks until, at last, they came to a small clearing where a second caravan awaited them.

Phoebe smiled in greeting when the burly figure of "Sancho Panza" came out of the thicket to unharness the horses. He bowed with the courtliness of an old retainer, and, the horses being freed of their load and turned loose, he went back to the fire he had kindled. In a little while, the smell of frying bacon blended with the incense of the morning.

MAN, MAID, AND THE HOUR

"You must eat, my pretty one," said Ricardo, and made for her a couch of dried bracken. "And when you have rested we shall move on."

Dexterously, the one-armed "Sancho Panza" prepared a breakfast of bacon and eggs and coffee that was delicious. When she had eaten and rested a while, Ricardo brought her a bowl of clear spring water and a mirror so that she might make her simple toilet. Then he and his servant withdrew to their respective tasks, leaving her to queenly privacy.

She slept for an hour or two and when she awoke it was Ricardo on whom her gaze first alighted; he was sitting on a pile of brushwood where he had kept vigil.

The sun was almost straight overhead.

"We have no great distance to go," he said gently, "but the day wears on." He assisted her to arise and helped her to her place on the driver's seat. "Sancho Panza" rode with them this time; the second caravan was left in the clearing.

Following tortuous paths through the forest they came to the old Fourteenth Century Church of which she had dreamed!

Dreamed? It was one night, on Farmer's Hill, when the world seemed to have settled into sleep, that she dreamed of just such a romantic journey as this. Ricardo was with her, even as on this day; she was content to go with him wherever he might take her. The dream church had emerged from a glorious tangle of greenery and an aged priest had awaited them at the door, an open prayer-book in his hand, a wisp of silver hair falling over his forehead.

The dream was materializing—that was all. She was not conscious of any feeling of nervousness, of strangeness. All that was happening was natural, and, being natural, was right.

Ricardo lifted her to the ground, drew her arm into the protection of his, and, followed by "Sancho Panza",

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

they passed along the moss-covered pathway to the door of the crumbling church.

"This is the maid of whom I spoke," said Ricardo, and produced the licence he had brought from London.

To Phoebe he said :

"This dear priest is one of the few friends that remain to me."

They entered the church and stood side by side at the chancel steps where the ceremony was duly observed ; he set the gold band on her finger and together they went forward and knelt before the altar.

They were made man and wife—John Sampson Heather, otherwise "Ricardo", and Phoebe, daughter of Sir Thomas Shadrow, Baronet, of the County of Sussex.

They signed the register in the old vestry and the witnesses were the manservant and the vergier.

And when it was done, the aged priest held his two palms to her cheeks and drawing her head slightly forward touched her brow with his lips.

They passed again into the forest and reached the clearing.

Dusk came and "Sancho Panza" replenished the camp-fire with pine boughs and the more fragrant pine needles. She watched from the window of the caravan. The red glow spread across the clearing to where she leaned ; it suffused her cheeks and tinged her hair and her eyes shone like the reflection of stars in a silent pool.

Dusk deepened to darkness and "Sancho Panza" erected the bell tent that was to serve as bridal chamber. Ricardo plunged into the forest and returned with dried fern and sweet-smelling spring flowers. These he placed within the tent, then walked very slowly to the caravan.

She came to the steps and he held out his arms so that he might lift her down.

"Sancho Panza" withdrew to the other caravan. And the lovers were left alone.

MAN, MAID, AND THE HOUR

She walked with Ricardo to the tent and, before entering, tilted back her head the while her hands rested on his shoulders.

"Dear wife!" he said, tenderly.

She passed in and lay down on the rude yet lovely couch.

Ricardo drew the folds of the tent together.

He lay down beside her in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXX

WINDS MAY BLOW THEMSELVES OUT

WHEN Phoebe's note was found by Virginia in the camp on Farmer's Hill, the things of the wild went scuttling away in all directions because of the human explosion that came from Sir Thomas.

Virginia's calm was all the more remarkable by comparison.

"After them ! We must chase after them !" he stormed. "They cannot have travelled far unless they used a car and Hogan says he fancies he saw the caravan at the bottom of the hill."

"And how shall we chase after them, my dear ?" Virginia asked, when his rage had subsided sufficiently to allow of her voice being heard.

He swung around to Hogan.

"Get down to the village at once," he commanded, "and hire the fastest car there."

Hogan shook his head doubtfully.

"You couldn't take a car along the tracks they'll follow," he said sententiously.

"Inform the police !" Sir Thomas said.

"Wouldn't it make ill-reading in the newspapers, my dear ?" said Virginia. "Do try to calm yourself and let us ponder ways and means."

"Ponder, woman !"

"'Virginia,' my dear."

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Virginia ?"

"I was never more rational, my love. Will it improve matters if I fly into a rage and call down the wrath of Heaven on my child's head ?"

"She's gone ! Gone with that ruffian !"

WINDS MAY BLOW OUT

"She loves him and he loves her. Of that I am satisfied in my heart."

"By this time the foul thing will have been done."

"He loves her," said Virginia in simple rebuke.

He clenched his hands and smote the air.

"The scoundrel! The sly, unprincipled scoundrel! By God, I'll shoot him if he has injured her!"

"Let Hogan go down to the village, my dear, and send a telegram to Reggie. He will know how to act."

"Am I not capable of protecting my own daughter? Of knowing what to do in an emergency such as this?"

"She may not need protection," said Virginia. "Let us try to read romance into what seems so dreadful to you now."

"Romance! Romance be damned!"

Virginia turned away from him and walked slowly along the path that brought her to the edge of the wood. She looked into the far distance where the white road wound its way through meadow and copse. Recollection of her own words to Phoebe peopled the road for her. Waiting for someone to come over the brow of the hill! Meeting and passing on, together, back over the brow and into the mists of the valley beyond!

Virginia strove to understand her own emotions as she stood there, an elbow resting against an oak. Where was the pain that comes of severance? She was conscious only of a strange feeling of elation. It was as though she had seen a well-loved child of hers freed from bondage. She sought to chide herself because of this feeling, but it would not be repressed. Convention had been flouted, but her heart was not bruised by the flouting.

When she returned to the camp, she found Sir Thomas sitting alone, his head bowed into his hands. Hogan was striding down the hill to the village to dispatch the telegram to Reggie.

"Virginia, I believed that I had cured her of her silly infatuation," said Sir Thomas.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"She was deeply in love," said Virginia.

He flung up his head in a spasm of temper.

"Must you harp on that—that absurd notion?" he cried out.

"Love will not be thwarted, Thomas."

"Look here, Virginia! Make a great effort to pull yourself together. We're living in the Present, not in the sentimental old Past."

"Dear man," said Virginia, "I feel as though this had taken me right back into the Past. And I wouldn't have believed that the Past could be so beautiful—in a way."

"Beautiful! He's kidnapped her! That's the brutal truth! That's the only sane way of looking at it."

"You may look at it from many angles that make it seem hideous, my dear," said Virginia. "I prefer to look at it from that angle which imparts sweetness to it."

"Kidnapped and seduced her! There you are! My daughter! The daughter of—of Sir Thomas Shadrow!"

"Perhaps, I should have felt happier if she had taken me a little more fully into her confidence."

"Happier? Do you imagine that I would have allowed her to run off with that mountebank?"

"Let us wait till Reggie arrives, my dear. You frighten me with your temper more than she has startled me with her sudden resolve."

"I ought to go to the police!"

"She is a woman, dear man. Only a child to me, but a woman to the world. Let us try to think calmly and reason it out. Personally, I believe that Ricardo is capable of great chivalry."

"Ricardo? Ricardo? Do you think that's his real name? There's a mystery about that rascal. The next blow to meet will be an attempt at blackmail."

"What have we to fear from blackmail, my dear?" she asked.

WINDS MAY BLOW OUT

"You are implying that I haven't any money. Is that fair to me, Virginia? Have you no regard for my name? My daughter the mistress of a rogue and vagabond who wanders about the country in a foul caravan and——"

"I have never thought that The House With the Golden Windows was foul," said Virginia. "When you are in a violent temper it is rather uncomfortable, my dear, but when it is a sweet and lovable husband who sits there with me I liken it to a haven of rest."

"Crazy! Crazy! This has turned your brain. And I'm left alone to handle the situation. Where the devil has Hogan got to?"

"He has to walk to the village, my dear, and from the manner of his gait when he set out I don't think he had much liking for his task."

"Liking? Liking? He feels the disgrace of it all. And what of Reggie? How is my brave boy going to take this crushing blow at his pride?"

"We can only wait until we hear from him," said Virginia. "It does not help us to anticipate his distress."

Reggie replied by telegram from near Chichester:

"Dreadfully worried writing you to-night."

The telegraph boy who brought that message up the hill from the village waited respectfully while Sir Thomas read it; then he asked if there was any reply which he might take back to the post-office.

"No," Sir Thomas barked. "Get out of it!"

The boy was leaving the service of the Government, anyway, so perhaps he was justified in taking a chance.

"All right, Frowsy Whiskers!" he retorted. "If you *have* backed a loser you needn't try to take it out of me."

Sir Thomas reached for a sapling, but the boy was on his bicycle and away before the irate little storm-fiend could get across the clearing.

Virginia read the message and sighed.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"There!" said Sir Thomas. "That should give you a hint of what this horrible, this degrading affair means to him. I know that he insisted on Ricardo leaving us: he feared what has happened."

Reggie's letter arrived by the second delivery on the following day. Virginia handed the letter to the little fury, but he thrust it back saying that he couldn't read it, his heart was too full. She read, in a slow, dispassionate voice:

"Look here, pater, why should you worry me with a trifling matter of *that* description when I'm sunk in a sea of trouble and going down for the third time? I'm 'sore'! Everything was going like an eight-cylinder car and not the semblance of a 'knock', when like a fool I yielded to the voice of the tempter, to wit, Buggs, aided and abetted by Marie the Fat. They inveigled me into buying a camel for them to 'star' in a new act. It was all right on paper; Sadie did the sketch and Harold 'produced' it better than any London producer could have done it. The camel arrived and brought with it all the trouble it could pick up on the journey. First, it bolted in the High Street and got one leg down a manhole. The whole dam' town gathered around to watch us get the beast out. It roared and yowled and kicked and bit and the kids in the street started in to heave brick-bats at it. Shop windows were smashed, a policeman was run over, and Buggs had two fights with the crowd. Marie sailed in to give him a hand and the fire brigade turned out to stop the row. We got the camel back to the camp, but in the night-time it broke loose, stampeded the horses and bit Buggs in the seat of his pants, and deeper. He is now in hospital. In the end we had to shoot that camel to prevent further trouble. Then, down came a torrential rain and swilled us into the middle of a field. Two property deals fell through just when I felt certain they were okay. Aunt Agatha's monkey was lost in the rainstorm. She's inconsolable,

WINDS MAY BLOW OUT

because she said it was getting so like Harold in appearance. She will have it that the camel made a meal of it, but everybody in the show is blaming everything on that camel. All this whirlwind of *real* trouble and yet you must peeve me with this story about Phoebe running away with Ricardo! What of it? She isn't a child! What do you expect me to do? Get astride another camel and scour the desert for them? Why shouldn't she run away with Ricardo if they're in love with each other? Good luck to both of them! May they never be fools enough to buy a camel. Now, get your mind rested in that haven of bliss. We shall be picking you up within a fortnight or so. Sadie joins me in sending oodles of love to the dear mater. Say! You would have run away with the mater if her father hadn't given you permission to woo her? What? Cheers from the crowd and most of all from Sadie and self.—Reg.”

No matter what may have been Reggie's real feelings when he received the telegram, that was the right letter to have written. Virginia understood, even if Sir Thomas scratched the back of his head and wondered aloud if the modern world had gone mad.

CHAPTER XXXI

BACK TO THE OPEN ROAD

IT was a month later when Reggie and Sadie arrived at Farmer's Hill in their caravan. They had come to take away the three who had wintered there—Sir Thomas, Lady Shadrow and Hogan.

Spring was mellowing into summer.

When Hogan heard the rumble of wheels he tore through the undergrowth of the wood to catch a sight of the succouring sail, as he called it. Hogan had reached that age when it is inadvisable to insist too strenuously on the glory of independence or even individuality. He was still tough in the hide, but his joints creaked a trifle. He couldn't say when he might not have to ask Sir Thomas to be lenient towards him.

He hurried down the slope of the hill to greet the arrivals. He looked at Reggie as he might have looked at a sergeant-major in his soldiering days ; and he said :

"Sir ! When you're picking the new draft, for the love of Ould Ireland, pick me !"

"You want to come back to the old regiment, Hogan ?" said Reggie.

"By the powers, I do, sir !"

"You love the road ?"

"The open road, sir, and the stars and the moon and the wind——"

"Steady !" said Reggie, bunching his fist. "If you come any of that stuff on me, Hogan, I'll sock you, good and hard. I've heard those words so often that they smell like a corpse to me . . . How's Sir Thomas ?"

"Hungry for a sight of the road, sir," said Hogan.

"And Lady Shadrow ?"

"May the saints preserve her," said Hogan.

BACK TO THE OPEN ROAD

"How's the hooch in the village?" Sadie asked.

"The hooch, m'lady?" said Hogan.

"The beer, you mutt?"

"Excellent, m'lady."

"Then, why the dry voice and the sob in your throat?"

"Tell me, little lady, is that thin man still with you? The man who begs the Almighty to destroy the talking pictures?"

"Sure, Hogan. Why?"

"I've got a few new prayers for him, lady." He looked back in the direction of the camp. Then, with courtliness: "How's her ladyship?"

Sadie looked down her nose.

"Ses you?"

"Lady Briskett," said Hogan.

"Ses you, again?"

"Aggie," said Hogan rather dubiously.

"Ah," said Sadie and sighed in relief. "I was beginning to fear that wintering in this glorious retreat had made you 'ritzy', Hogan. Nice thing if you came back among the comrades of the road and started in to air your snobbery. Lead on, you Irish harp, and let's get to the camp."

Farmer's Hill rocked with merriment that day. Reggie and Sadie had "rehearsed" a good many more speeches for the occasion. They were aware of all it meant to Sir Thomas to lose his daughter in circumstances that were not quite conventional: they were aware of the snobbery that still lingered in his little body. The new life on the road had cured him of many maladies, but there was still the haunting hope in his heart that one day he might go back to the narrow circle in which he had lived since boyhood.

Reggie held his mother in his arms and kissed her with all the boisterousness of a schoolboy. He held her from him and appraised her brown complexion, the brightness of her eyes, the fullness of her cheeks and neck.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"You're getting younger every day, darling," he told her. "Never have I seen so much happiness in your eyes."

"You're living again, dear," said Sadie. "Isn't it so?"

"Dear ones!" said Virginia, and her eyes were moist with joy. "It's been heavenly staying here through the winter, but I'm hungering for the road. It's true, true. There must be gipsy blood in me."

Then they turned to Sir Thomas who was standing apart, preparing to play the heavy father, take an oath to high Heaven that he would never, never forgive, then grasp the hand of Reggie and declare: "I shall never know sleep again till I have torn the heart from the villain's body."

Reggie got in first and spoiled that frame of mind.

"Hello, old scout! By Jove! What a stalwart! We've come to take you away with us. Can't do without you. We want a strong man to keep the new lion-tamer in check when he's had one over the eight. And—and—" his voice died away in mock alarm. "When's the funeral?" he asked, marking the sullen cast of feature. "Who's died?"

Sir Thomas cleared his throat.

"Phoebe is not here, my boy!" he said. "You appear to have forgotten the tragedy that has fallen on me since last we met."

Reggie burst into laughter.

"Oh, Sadie!" he cried out. "Come and listen to this. I told you that Phoebe was married—didn't I? There was no mistake about it—was there? She hadn't died?"

"To me," said Sir Thomas, pompously, "she is dead already."

"Very well, then," said Reggie, "why cling to mourning? Why nurse your grief?"

"Did you say 'married', my dear?" said Lady Shadrow, eagerly.

"Married," Reggie affirmed. "I made inquiries."

"Married to that blackguard?" roared Sir Thomas.

BACK TO THE OPEN ROAD

"Why not?" Reggie asked.

"Why not? You ask why not? She might have married anybody!"

"True," said Reggie, "but she chose to marry *somebody*!"

Lady Shadrow leaped at a fugitive hope.

"A Prince Charming, Reggie? Tell me—tell me?"

Even Sir Thomas caught the hopeful note in her voice: it started one in his heart.

"Oh, no," said Reggie. "Don't make a stage-play of it. John Sampson Heather—that's his real name—was a doctor: he served in the Army and got into trouble when he started to serve Society. That's the long and the short of it."

"Trouble?" Sir Thomas echoed. "What trouble? What was the nature of the trouble?"

Reggie saw the light of suspicion in his father's eyes. Rightly, he reasoned that a very little lie might be more valuable to everybody than a very big truth.

"A dreadful trouble," he said. "He lost all his money and had to take to the road. Can you imagine anything more dreadful than that?"

Lady Shadrow smiled in her relief.

"I knew that he was a gentleman," she said, softly. "You are certain that they married?"

"In a little old church near Ashdown Forest," said Reggie. "Just the romantic touch that Ricardo would infuse into the business."

"And, to-day——?"

"They are touring, just as we are. I haven't seen them, but we have had artistes from their show, and so the news carries. They are doing well, but of course not so well as we are. Eh, Sadie?"

"There's only one leading organization on the road," said Sadie proudly. "So comprehensive, so quick to snap up opportunities."

They all sat down by the side of The House With the

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Golden Windows, and between them Reggie and Sadie narrated all that had happened during the winter months. They were doing splendidly. The luck was always with them when it came to handling a big project. There were minor troubles, but they were relegated to the dust-heap of irritations that could be forgotten within the hour.

How was the "treasury" ?

Too good to tell about lest it got to the ears of the income-tax people.

Was there really any money left in the country for entertainment ?

The people would always insist on being entertained. How could they bear up against the burden of taxation and vapourings of professional politicians unless they were entertained ?

But money, money, money ? How was it being made ? Was it possible to make it honestly ?

"I'll answer that in the words of one big man I met in London," said Reggie. "He was a millionaire and I went to him with a proposition. I said to him : 'Is it possible in these days to make money ?' 'Quite possible,' he said. 'Right,' said I, 'the amount I want to make is fifty thousand pounds'. 'It should be easy if you keep your wits about you,' he said. 'I want to make it honestly,' said I. 'Ah !' said he. 'Now, you've given me a problem !' "

Sir Thomas drew back his head and gave his grey beard a touch with his fingers' tip.

"I trust that you are making it honestly," he said, in a superior tone.

"Pater," Reggie's face was grave of expression—"you don't hope anything of the kind. The old Quaker's injunction is yours : 'My boy, go into the world and get money ! Get it honestly, if you can, but—get it.' "

"You do me an injustice, Reggie," said Sir Thomas.

"A hard truth is always an injustice," said Reggie.

"If I could say to you, pater, I've got the money to

BACK TO THE OPEN ROAD

buy back Highfield Court and put you in your old social position——”

“Is that possible, my dear boy?”—eagerly.

“Take your foot off the gas, pater. I’m making an argument. If I could say that, would you worry your head about the source of the money?”

“Most assuredly I should, Reginald.”

“Then you’ve been wasting your time on this earth,” said Reggie. “You should be sitting on a fleecy cloud, leading the angels in the choir.”

Lady Shadrow leaned across and touched her son on the shoulder. There was a beautiful light in her eyes.

“All I say, my dear,” she whispered, “is this. Do nothing that would modify my dream picture of you.”

He patted her hand reassuringly.

“We’re making money,” he said, seriously, “by using our brains. You remember that mad guy who came to us—the pater found him—with all sorts of ideas on the reforming of the world and putting respect into the heart of a bank manager? The idea merchant? Well, I kicked him out, but there was a good deal of sound logic in his ideas. I’m using a lot of his ‘genius’.”

“Is that fair to your fellow man, Reginald?” asked Sir Thomas. “Picking his brains and giving him nothing in return?”

Reggie turned to his father and wagged an admonishing finger.

“Isn’t that how fortunes are made?” he asked.

“How did Andrew Carnegie make his pile?”

“I didn’t know Andrew Carnegie,” said the little snob, stiffly.

“And he didn’t know you, pater,” said Reggie. “If the Almighty had said to Andrew Carnegie: ‘I have created Thomas Shadrow *also*,’ Andrew Carnegie would have answered in one word: ‘Why?’”

“I’m sorry to disagree,” said Sir Thomas coldly.

“I do not hold with pilfering the brains of genius.”

“What is genius?” asked Lady Shadrow reflectively.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"The art of taking pains," said Sir Thomas sapiently.

"The art of taking *gains*," said Sadie.

Reggie told them of work he had done, work he was doing, and work they all hoped to do. Sadie was writing a book, and an American publisher had expressed deep interest in all that had been submitted to him. Harold was employing and exploiting his knowledge of history from a business end. He had found that there wasn't an owner of a cowshed in the whole county who wouldn't pay a price to have its history explored and written up in pamphlet form. The tenant or owner of a vermin-infested cottage with two old oak beams would pay for the "truth" about its place in history even if he had to borrow the money from his relatives to pay the bill.

"We've planted William Penn in twenty houses already," said Reggie unblushingly, "and we nearly got Abraham Lincoln and Cal Coolidge into a Pullborough pub, only Sadie jibbed at the last minute, holding that it wasn't fair to—to the vanity of her countrymen. Harold has read up the history of every mansion we've come across, and the owners are simply dying of impatience—they want the pageant staged this summer. Why? Not because they are deeply interested in history, but because they want to show their neighbours what fine fellows they are to have selected the house in which a crowd of bum knights caroused. Oh, pater, it makes me tired to see and hear of so many people in a civilized country soaking themselves in the vitriol of vanity. That's the word, isn't it, Sadie?"

"Wait, kid, wait," said Sadie. "I put that speech in the caravan, but I don't think I've got it on me now."

Reggie rose to his feet, set one hand on his hip and raised the other to an imaginary audience.

"Anyhow," he said, "it goes like this: Vanity, vanity, vanity! There you have the besetting sin of seventy-five per cent. of supposedly sane people. They live in the Past when they ought to be buckling down to

BACK TO THE OPEN ROAD

their job in the Present, pushing the old world along instead of moaning that it *used* to be a grand place to live in. Half the world does its work in its dreams and there's no pay for that sort of thing. It's the fellow who takes a pitchfork or a spade and gets on with his job who's going to win in the end. How's that, Sadie?"

"Boy, that's good to me," said Sadie. "Now take your 'curtain' and sit down."

Yes, they were making money. They allowed nothing like a chance to escape them. That idea of running a chain of small town cinemas was a good one. Reggie was convinced that he could raise the capital and start a cinema in every town with a population of five to ten thousand, run a "localized" film for stock purposes and play on the vanity of the residents. He was inspecting and selling property—on commission. When he could be certain that the deal was a good one, he found the money himself (he didn't mention that Mr. Hiram Jolson was backing him in the enterprises, and they were not to know that he wasn't taking a cent from Jolson or anybody else unless he were satisfied that it was a good business deal and he could come out of it on the right side without losing any of his individuality or making the borrowing seem like charity). And the old show was developing wonderfully well!

"I admit that we are nomads," said Reggie, "but we are working nomads! If we should be camped in a district and have the bad luck to run up against an impoverished community and a few days of rain, we don't sit around a fire and await the return of the sunshine. No, we get about and find out if there's anything we can do. I've known Harold to superintend the making of a new drain on an estate. He didn't know much about it, but Sadie and I taught him how to convince the owner of the estate that when the drains of the City of London were being laid, they sent for Harold to teach them how. And he did."

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"And how!" said Sadie.

And so they talked and talked. And Sir Thomas almost forgot that devastating tragedy that had come into his life. Almost! While they were packing and getting ready to leave the clearing on Farmer's Hill, he said to Reggie:

"I'm going out into the country with you again, my boy, but my heart is heavy. What of Phoebe? That marriage? If it was a marriage!"

"Pater," said Reggie, "have you ever wondered what is the true relationship between me and Sadie?"

"I have," said Sir Thomas, "and it has given me many sleepless nights."

"Why?"

"The fear that you were not married."

"Well, what has that to do with you, pater?"

"My boy! How strangely you speak! If we did not conform to convention we should drift into the primitive."

"Well, if it will ease your mind, I'll tell you that we are married—were married before we left the States. But we get a big kick out of letting small-minded people think what they like. Now, having said that, I want to get on. Slide, pater! Slide! I'm due back at the camp by nightfall and we've a long road to travel."

Within the hour, The House With the Golden Windows was following the caravan of Reggie the Fool along the broad highway. Lady Shadrow was sitting back in her wicker chair, a book in her hand, a smile in her eyes, and joy in her heart. Sir Thomas Shadrow, ex-Justice of the Peace, was turning over some new snares he had made. Hogan, the man-of-all-jobs, was driving. He was more than happy. He was shaking hands with several kings of old Ireland.

The wind was crisp, the leaves of the trees were laughing in the spring sunshine, the hedgerows were flaunting their new green dresses.

Clinkety-clank! Clinkety-clank!

On the move! On the road!

CHAPTER XXXII

BEHIND THE MASK OF THE MUMMER

IT was a wonderful welcome the company gave to Sir Thomas and Lady Shadrow—especially Lady Shadrow.

They were encamped near Chichester, with designs on Arundel, then onward along the coast again as far as Hastings.

Harold, the historian, was keen on a pageant that should embrace the most striking incidents of the battle between William and Harold, his namesake. He fancied that he and Sadie could sketch out a series of dramatic episodes that would so pique the interest of the Hollywood film producers that they would borrow the American bootleggers' fast motor-boats to ensure being on time to see the stupendous spectacle.

Virginia was captivated by the greeting she was given by every artiste in the combination. How it had grown! There were so many new faces that she declared she would never be able to memorize them all. The voluble Marie set her mind partially at rest in this respect.

"My *dear*!" the fat blonde exclaimed in protest. "Fancy you feeling it necessary to meet them *all*. When I was at the top of the bill it never occurred to me to acknowledge the smaller fry. It isn't done, my dear! They don't expect it. They like to shine in your reflected glory, because it is something in *the* profession to be in the same bill as a famous star. And that's all there is to it."

Out of the maze of tents and caravans and general paraphernalia came Mr. Buggs. Thinner, thought Virginia. Rather hollow of the cheek, maybe, but healthy-skinned and vigorous.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Welcome, fair lady!" cried Mr. Buggs, as he approached The House With the Golden Windows. He bent himself double when he halted at the foot of the steps. "And welcome, again! Many times welcome!"

"Dear Mr. Fitzherbert! How good to the heart it is to meet you again!"

Virginia extended her hand. Gallantly, he touched the tips of her fingers with his lips.

"The winter of our discontent is past," said he. "Glorious summer doth open its warm arms to give you greeting."

"You are happy, Mr. Fitzherbert?" Virginia asked.

"I span the world," said Mr. Buggs. "I stand tip-toe on the mountain tops! I lift my gaze to the stars that bejewel the sky and from my heart there goes forth a pæan of praise. I give you welcome"—he doubled himself once more with a hand pressed to his heart—"and beg to remain for all time your devoted slave and admirer, faithfully and sincerely yours, Clarence Brough Fitzherbert!"

Yes, the enterprise had prospered. The principal secret was organization and system. They were still small, as touring outfits go, but there was every prospect of Reginald's dreams being realized. They worked hard. They never disdained the meanest "market" that might produce a little profit. They had stripped the rôle of jester of its inherent laziness, and there was no menial task in the camp that any of them dreamed of shirking.

All artistes and "hands" worked on a profit-sharing basis, but Reginald's property deals were exclusively his and Sadie's.

And the notion of running a cinema in many small towns was one that developed amazingly: now that he had some capital he found not the slightest difficulty in getting the backing of a bank. He made this discovery: In the period of England's greatest trade depression, there was more money lying idle than the banks knew

BEHIND MASK OF THE MUMMER

what to do with. The capitalists seemed to be waiting—waiting—waiting. For what? For a return of the confidence that should exist between them and Labour. In truth, England was not bankrupt—she was suffering from stalemate. The capitalist was dubious about the intentions of the Government: he couldn't make up his mind whether to invest his money in industry or let it lie idle without interest for a period and go abroad to ruminate. He felt that if he built a factory the chances were that some attitude on the part of Labour would knock the bottom out of his enterprise. And Labour felt that it was about time it should have a share in the profits that might be made if the country were run on business lines with the spirit of altruism permeating the whole of the operation.

During the first four months of that year, the company laid its plans for the series of pageants which Harold thought could be turned into good money. Everything was done systematically. Working or sewing parties were organized among the residents of a district and these were superintended by Sadie. The cost of putting on a pageant, however insignificant, is considerable unless each one taking part in it contributes at least a mite towards the whole.

"Fat" parts were saleable! Marie Kordinski was quick to indicate that aspect of the productions. And Reggie was equally quick to show his appreciation of her acumen. What mattered it if a skinny, diminutive, toothless descendant of a bold, bad knight of Elizabeth's day should wish to play the part, clad in armour and trying to carry an ancestral sword as big as a fence pole? If he paid a handsome fee for the privilege of making himself look an idiot why should Reginald protest in the interests of Art?

"Sadie, girl," he said, "we're not in this business for our health. Art is all very well for dreamers, but I've come to the conclusion that while your true artist damns the soul of the mercenary, he extols him to the

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

skies when he can 'touch' him for a little hard cash. I've never yet met the highbrow who wasn't grateful for a dab in the hand. At least, he said he was grateful: if he wasn't, he was no more than a hypocrite, which doesn't say much for his sense of art."

Oh, Reggie was developing quite a deal of philosophy. And Sadie wasn't very far behind him in his learning. Even when money was flowing in with beautiful smoothness she could still count the words on a telegram. That's solid, irrefutable proof of stability of mind in the moment of affluence. Why give the Government an extra penny for the satisfaction of making a message read grammatically?

These were great days for dear Virginia.

What does it signify how they appealed to Sir Thomas? His was a most elastic mind. When he was among the crowd he was more primitive than any of them! They called him "Tom", or "Old Tom", and he appeared to get a deal of satisfaction out of the familiarity. It was a privilege, the value of which he couldn't estimate, to be called by his Christian name by some massive, big-boned sword swallower or weight-lifter. He was thrilled in the same way that a small boy is thrilled by the casual nod of a prominent football professional. Only in those moments when he fancied that he might, again, sit on his moth-eaten throne as a County Dignitary, did he inflate his chest and ask the patient Virginia to remember the grandeur of his line.

The story of those pageants may never be written. The credit of the country might be affected if it were. America might foreclose on the mortgage and Italy and France might ask of the wide, wide world why they should pay back loans to a mentally sick patient who couldn't calculate with any degree of accuracy.

There was one incident that would have sent the "slap-stickers" of Hollywood into a delirium. It occurred in a pageant that called for ancient armour for the principal character. He was a stout man, accustomed to

BEHIND MASK OF THE MUMMER

sink his two bottles of port every day, "as his ancestors had done before him".

He produced the armour of a noteworthy character in his line, and tried to get into it. He couldn't. Mr. Buggs, who was superintending that episode in the pageant, was highly annoyed by the flaw in his share of the programme; he essayed the task of donning the armour, just to show the descendant how it could be done.

Hogan, who was a man-of-all-jobs at these affairs, helped to get Mr. Buggs into the steel suit. He had a difficult task, but he took it seriously. As he stepped back, hammer in hand, from the finished work, he said: "If you get out of that, Buggs, you should find Dublin Gaol an easy thing."

Mr. Buggs couldn't get out. They wrestled with the contraption for the greater part of an afternoon. They fed Mr. Buggs through his visor and he had to take what they gave him whether or not he had any liking for it. Things began to assume a serious aspect and it looked as though he would have to sleep in the steel shroud. Then Marie the Fat had a brain-wave. She called to him through the visor:

"Buggs! They're burying William the Conqueror at sunset! Jump to it or you'll miss the performance!"

He was outside that suit of armour before Hogan had got the "click" and "wrench" out of his ears.

Praise to Joe Buggs! He proved himself a splendid all-round fellow during that summer. The "treasury" was swelling, but he didn't ask pertinent questions: he knew that he was getting a straight deal; money was being set aside both for him and his ample-bosomed partner, Marie. From the first to last, his loyalty was unflinching and his ideas were not always devoid of logic.

The effect of the open air life on Aunt Agatha was a continual source of anxiety to the gentle Virginia. There were times when she gazed nervously at her

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

sister-in-law and asked of nobody in particular: "Is this really the widow of Lord Briskett? What would poor 'Gogo' think and say if he could come back, to-day, and see her?"

For Agatha had not only come down to the level of the toughest tent-hand, but lower still. Snobbery, for her, had lost its meaning; social rank was something she might have read about in her girlhood and forgotten before she was called on to tackle the real problems of life. She was distinctly primitive in all that she said and did. The hypochondriac who used to drive poor Hogan to the verge of insanity with her whinings and wailings and insistence on diet sheets being observed as faithfully as any other ritual he knew, had become a hard-boiled, hard-skinned, hard-voiced martinet who knew what she wanted and made certain that she got it.

"Aggie," as she was known to all of them, could tell a rough-hewn, bewhiskered "hand" a few brutal truths about his immediate ancestors. And she could express herself in a vocabulary that was horribly incarnadined on occasion.

Once, when Virginia reproached her gently for vilifying the Strong Man who had inadvertently dropped one of his weights on her foot, she smiled blandly and said that she really didn't know what the words meant, but she had discovered that for some occult reason they carried more power than delicate phraseology.

Snobbery? "Aggie" was the most easy-going comrade of them all. She could handle a roughneck in the shape of a labourer slightly inebriated; she could play that game of "poker" which leaves a nasty taste in the mouth of the loser; and she could set an example when it came to sheer hard work and putting up with a simple diet. If "Aggie" had served in the Army during the last war she would have joyed in the rôle of Orderly Officer.

"Any complaints?" she would call out in the big marquee where meals were served.

BEHIND MASK OF THE MUMMER

"The pork is not what it might be," one of the "hands" might say, having a grievance against the cook.

"Pork!" Aunt Agatha would echo. "Do you mean to say they're giving you pork for dinner? Pork! To *you*! With a nose that shape! Whining about the quality of pork at one and eight a pound! What the divvle were you fed on before you joined this outfit? Scraps, and glad to get 'em."

Aunt Agatha had taken to the life of the road. Sir Thomas's fears that she would never recover from the metamorphosis were soundly based. She told Virginia that she would die in the service of Reggie and Sadie, but she couldn't close her eyes for the last time until she had realized the one great dream that carried her on from day to day. She wanted to take at least a part of the circus crowd down Piccadilly and around Mayfair; she wanted to send out invitations to all poor "Gogo's" friends so that they could gather on the pavement and see her go by. And she wanted to tell them some plain truths about themselves as she passed along.

Aunt Agatha, by the way, was responsible for the maintenance of all animals kept by the combination. She issued the food for them, checked accounts and had a memory that chastened any potential swindler of the commissariat.

Virginia heard from Phoebe only seldom during that year. The notes that came were simple and direct, yet they were eloquent of happiness. Ricardo had similar ideas to those of Reggie and Sadie, and his ambition was not less great.

Again, Sir Thomas and Virginia passed the winter on Farmer's Hill, and Hogan was deputed to serve them well and faithfully.

Again, they welcomed the spring and the reunion. The year was full of incident and success for the crowd. Reggie's luck held good. There wasn't an innovation that didn't prove profitable. And he never turned down a proposal on the ground of its being too small or insignificant for his consideration.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Little fish are sweet," he said to Sadie, when they were calculating the profits made on three or four fruit shops which he opened. In charge of these shops he placed members of the company who had reached the end of their careers as entertainers.

And that brings the story of the Shadd Rowe Merrie England Company to a circumstance that was not without its pathos.

Clarence Brough Fitzherbert was kicked in the groin by a restive horse, and although the best available medical aid was summoned immediately, it was obvious that he could never again strut the stage and "do his stuff". The ghost of Shakespeare must have felt a twinge of pain when Mr. Buggs gave what proved to be his farewell performance.

The travelling days of Clarence Brough Fitzherbert were over! How then? What was to become of him?

In the small tent that was known as the "office", Marie Kordinski, *alias* Marie the Fat, *alias* plain Emily Potts, was received by Reginald the Fool. There was courage in her eyes, and yet her voice touched all that was sentimental in Reggie.

"Guv'nor" (that was the appellation generally employed in these days), "I want a little heart-to-heart talk with you about the old piece of cheese—meaning Clarence."

"How's he shaping, Marie?" said Reggie, who had just returned from London where he had been engaged with Mr. Hiram Jolson on a business transaction of importance.

Marie screwed up her mouth.

"Guv'nor, he's through with the show business," she said. "I try to cheer him up by telling him the public that loved him will never let his memory fade, and when he doesn't seem to get any punch out of that I read him some of my old Press notices. That puts guts into him. You know what I mean? He's happy to have been with a 'star' what topped the bill. Straight! When I remind him of what the manager of the Topham

BEHIND MASK OF THE MUMMER

Alhambra said about our turn in nineteen-something, the tears come to his eyes and he says: 'Old girl, we haven't lived for nothing.' But now, he's taken his last curtain. You and me are hard-boiled . . . Well, not you and me, because you're a gentleman, but say Hogan and me, if you like. We look at life through the right sort of spectacles. Buggs and me are through!"

"Through, Marie? You?" Reggie was very sympathetic in his attitude.

"Could I leave old Buggs?" said Marie. "Not on your life! We've been through rough weather and smooth. And we ain't had no joy! I *don't* think! I know that I could still go on and draw the crowd, but what's the box-office mean to me if Buggs ain't there? Get me, Guv'nor?"

"I get you," said Reggie, indulgently.

Marie moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and there was a suspicious sparkle in her eyes.

"We've got to say good-bye to the old show," she said, and tried vainly to infuse a little lightness into her demeanour. "We've got to quit, hand in our 'doings', and—and it comes a little hard to one who used to be billed. . . . You know?"

"I know," said Reggie gently.

Marie fidgeted a little.

"I hate to mention it, Guv'nor," she said, "but you've always told us that you prefer straight talk when it comes to a matter of 'how much'?"

"Marie," said Reggie, "you and Clarence have a nice comfortable sum due to you."

"I don't want to take it all, Guv'nor."

"You can leave as much of it as you wish," said Reggie, "but I don't see that you ought to touch it."

"Why, Guv'nor? How can we get along?"

Reggie reached across and patted her hand.

"Do you imagine that I'm going to let two fine old comrades like you leave us altogether?"

"Guv'nor?" Marie's eyes were rounded.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Marie, you and dear old Buggs gave me the big idea that's developed into this show. I don't forget that. Now there's nothing to be gained by hiding from ourselves the fact that he can't carry on. He must have a job in a town."

"When you say 'must', it sounds like Charlie Cochran was talking, Guv'nor."

"You must stay with Buggs."

"I'd stay with him, Guv'nor, if he was mouldy."

"And you ought to be at the top of any bill that he's connected with."

"That's kind of you, Guv'nor. It's my rightful place, but there have been times when I've felt that I shall never get to the top of the bill again till they put it on my tombstone."

"You're going to be on the top of the bill that I have in mind," said Reggie. "But you'll have to sink a few prejudices."

"Tell me, Guv'nor? I'm all 'het up', as that dear one of yours would say. What bill?"

"I've recently bought a cinema in Seatown."

"Buggs!"

"That's habit, Marie. Forget your prejudices. This is a good, profit-showing cinema. A woman like you and a man like Clarence may push up the business in no time. And your name, Marie, will be at the top of the bill. Think of it! 'The Seatown Cinema, under the personal management of Marie Kordinski, famous danseuse'!——"

"Guv'nor! I'm going to cry! S'elp me, I'm going to cry!"

"And, Marie, I'd like to add to that announcement something that I feel in my heart. I'd like to add: 'The best scout I've ever met, straight as a die, loyal as the sun to the fields and the flowers, indifferent to bad luck, generous when it's good!' That's what I'd like to add, Marie. Now, how about it?"

And Marie the Fat couldn't answer. The tears were in her eyes. She looked about the tent for inspiration.

BEHIND MASK OF THE MUMMER

"It's been a lovely day," she said at last, and wiped her lips with the back of her hand because her handkerchief eluded her. Then: "Fancy, having to leave you and the crowd!" she said.

"We shall always be calling to see you, Marie," said Reggie.

"Leaving 'Aggie' with all her temper!"

"She's really very fond of you, Marie."

"Leaving Virginia, Guv'nor? That's what I was getting at."

And Reggie very nearly touched the beautiful as he said:

"Marie, all through this wonderful experience my mother has lived here—in my heart. She has been splendid!"

And Marie said, with a catch in her voice:

"Guv'nor, will you help me in a delicate matter? I didn't know till this thing happened that it would mean so much to me. We don't, on the road. But—but Clarence and I are not married! You know what I mean? She thinks that we are, although we 'star' under different names. Guv'nor, will you try to let her see that we're straight, and not just 'persons'?"

Reggie got up from his camp-stool, placed a hand on her shoulder and kissed her.

"Marie," he said, "my mother is ruled by her heart, not by convention."

"What should we have done without her?" Marie sighed and a happy light showed in her eyes. "There have been times when everything seemed to go wrong, but we've only had to look at her to take courage. I shall never forget her."

"Do you remember the night we 'teamed up', Marie?"

"Do I, Guv'nor!"

"That night I was in two frames of mind. I feel I can tell you now. I wanted to go on with the scheme that Sadie and I had worked out on our way from America, but I felt that I wasn't being kind to my mother. There would have been a way to keep her in comparative

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

comfort down there at Highfield Court. I could have borrowed the money that was necessary. Of course, you know, by now, all about the family name and the general position. I've taken it for granted that it would all leak out."

"Of course I know," said Marie casually. "It was enough for me that you were down and pretty badly bent. I admired you all for coming on the road. Why not?"

"And you know, too, that Sadie is my wife? We were married in Philadelphia before we sailed."

"Now, now, Guv'nor! What business is that of mine?" said Marie. "I've known you all these months and months and it hasn't occurred to me to ask if you were married. I wouldn't have told you what I did about me and Buggs, only—only I couldn't leave *her* with a wrong impression."

"She is very fond of both of you, Marie," said Reggie. "And she'll miss you when you're gone. I have the feeling that you and dear old Buggs will turn that cinema into a jolly good investment, Marie. You're in on sharing terms."

"It's wonderful of you to have thought of us in this way, Guv'nor."

"You'll never be hard up again so long as you don't go in for speculating on your own."

"Speculating, Guv'nor! I'm too old in the tooth for that. Give me the run of the cinema and plenty to keep my mind working and I ask no more. Give dear old Buggs a funeral or two in a fortnight and he'll be happy."

"All right," said Reggie. "That brings the interview to an end. And, look here, Marie, when you're settled in your new place, keep an eye open for any new venture that may suggest itself. We might even run a producing studio of our own, one of these days."

"Guv'nor, I've got the idea, already," said Marie. "You can't afford to run a big studio and pay fat salaries to bum artistes who let you down with their 'temperament' just when you're in the middle of a

BEHIND MASK OF THE MUMMER

production." She warmed up. "No, sir," she said, "that's the way to lose good money—giving these painted dolls and mummie boys silly salaries so's they can swank in the world what they're pulling down. What about the millions and millions of sap-heads who think they can act for the pictures? You'll find 'em in every town and village. And some of 'em have oodles of money! Get the idea, Guv'nor? It's the same as the pageant idea. If a button-head wants to play in a film, ask him how much good, solid dough he'll put up for the chance. The film needn't be shown anywhere except in his own house for the fun of his friends. You started me thinking along these lines. You saw there was money to be made out of the folly of the conceited. What about it?"

"Marie, you are getting wiser each succeeding day," said Reggie. "I shall think over that idea. It's one after my own heart."

In the fullness of time, Marie and Clarence Brough Fitzherbert were settled in the cinema. Success was assured on the opening night. Mr. Buggs, arrayed in dress clothes, recited a morsel from Shakespeare and presented a newspaper cheque to the driver of a steam-roller who had won a cross-word competition. Mr. Buggs began his speech with a telling tribute to the love of literature which had become so pronounced a feature of everyday life!

■ The Shadd Rowe Merrie England Fair Company sent fifty telegrams of congratulation to "the new management". These were read aloud to a vastly interested audience. Presentations were made to the "management" by most of the tradesmen in the town—motor-cycles, gold wrist-watches, mirrors, easy chairs and so forth. All these presents were handed over on the stage half-way through the film programme. They were taken back to the donors before the last reel was run through! Marie the Fat and Clarence Brough Fitzherbert knew a little about the value of publicity and how to get it.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ON THE ROAD ! ON THE ROAD !

ANOTHER year had passed. Another conference was being held in the drawing-room of Highfield Court !

Mr. Hiram Jolson was present ; he occupied a place of honour.

Sir Thomas Shadrow was standing near the french-windows ; his gaze was on the drive where half a dozen caravans were drawn up, awaiting the momentous decisions that had to be reached that afternoon.

There had been a lull in the conversation : Harold had not yet returned from his inspection of the grounds.

Lady Shadrow was sitting on the couch, her sun-browned hands clasped in an attitude of restfulness. Of all those present she and Mr. Jolson appeared to be most suited to their environment. She was smiling, reflectively, as she looked at Sir Thomas ; his beard was cut very short and his hair had been so trimmed by Hogan that the head seemed ridiculously small and round. The sweater he wore was old and faded and the opening at the neck so enlarged that his brown chest was exposed in a most immodest manner. He was wearing a pair of flannel "bags" that had started with grey as their hue and had finished up with more colours than a careless artist might find on a palette.

Aunt Agatha, too, had gone in for the short, crisp crop that is so hygienic on the road. Her habiliments would have given a land-girl ideas. The "wings" of her breeches stood out like the dorsal fin of a shark ; her red hands were sunk in the breeches' pockets ; and she was smoking a rudely-made cigarette.

Reggie was sitting at a table, pen in hand and his

ON THE ROAD! ON THE ROAD!

hair ruffled in perplexity. Sadie faced him and she was turning over pages and pages of contracts, bill matter, and general accounts.

"For the love of Pete open some of those windows, and let me have air," said Reggie irritably. "Then let's get down to this problem, finish it, and get back to life. Now, pater?"

Sir Thomas came slowly back from the french-windows. He took up his place near Virginia and the look of perplexity in his eyes was near to the pathetic.

"You know, you're not helping us a great deal," said Reggie. "Have you made up your mind?"

"I can't bring myself to believe that it's all true," said the little baronet.

"Read it all out again, Sadie," said Reggie, wearily. "Sing it if you think it will sink in better."

"It's all very simple," said Sadie, addressing Sir Thomas. "We kept it back from you and dear Virginia as long as we could, thinking it would be the finest surprise of your life."

"It was a surprise all right," said Sir Thomas, but there was no enthusiasm in his voice. "Whom have I to thank? What can I be expected to say?" He turned imploringly to Mr. Jolson, and held out his hands entreatingly. "You say that Highfield Court is mine again for the asking?"

Sadie broke in:

"Don't hand poppa all the bouquets," she said. "My Reggie jumped in and saved the property."

"Give your son all the credit, *sir*," said Mr. Jolson.

Sir Thomas echoed that "*sir*". It seemed to be all wrong. Only that morning he had heard one of the drivers refer to him as "that damned old fool, Tom," and it had sounded so homely and friendly to his ears.

"But—but have you actually bought the property, Reggie?" he asked, in a thin, unnatural voice.

"It was in the market," said Reggie, "and I had the chance to pick it up cheaply. Mr. Jolson has another

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

buyer ready to snap it up at a profit to all of us, but it's for you to say what shall be done with it."

Sir Thomas was still doubtful.

"I—we—your mother and I could afford to run it again?"

"And without the slightest risk of your getting into low water once more," said Reggie. "Sadie and I will handle accounts."

"Ah!" sighed Virginia and smiled gratefully at Sadie.

"And—and I might be able to take up my social life again where I left off?" Sir Thomas's mouth was behaving as though he had lost control of his facial muscles.

"You may be able to go back on the Bench of Magistrates to-morrow," said Reggie grimly. "It is believed that you have been abroad for a long spell. Your Society friends will envy you tremendously. By Jove, there should be a bunch of poachers ready for sentencing, pater!"

"My boy! My boy! Let us try to be serious." Sir Thomas was making queer little passes at the air with his hands. "And—and Hogan will stay with us?"

Hogan, lounging disconsolately near the open doorway, looked up and the sadness on his face would have touched the heart of Wung the Peke.

"Yes, you may have Hogan," said Reggie carelessly. "He'll love the job of getting back into butler's rig, and announcing the arrival of Sir Timothy Stiffback and Lady Bowlegs. He's been hungering for this chance to creep back into the comfort of an old county family residence. Haven't you, Hogan?"

"Yes, sir," said Hogan, adding in a loud whisper: "May the Saints forgive a liar once in his lifetime!"

Sir Thomas shuffled uneasily on his feet.

"It's marvellous, unbelievable," he said, gazing around the room. "All the furniture—everything—grounds in beautiful condition! Oh, Virginia, is it real, or am I dreaming it all?"

ON THE ROAD! ON THE ROAD!

"It's real, my dear," said Virginia tenderly. "It's *terribly* real."

Harold drifted in from the grounds. He was wet and mud-stained.

"I say, pater," he drawled, "there's one jolly old thing you'll have to do immediately. That bridge across the moat is rotten in parts. Better get Hogan to start that job to-morrow." He looked around inquiringly. "Why the silence?" he asked. "Haven't you fixed up the wretched business yet?"

Reggie waved him back from the table.

"Stand near the open window, Harold," he said. "The water in that moat never was like lavender. No, we haven't said good-bye to the pater yet and discussed the social duties that may fall on him during the coming year. There'll be a frightful lot of things to attend to, you know. He must get in touch with the county dignitaries of the old days, arrange parties on the lawn, send for the vicar and find out all about the forthcoming bazaars and the spinsters of the parish. And he absolutely must send for his tailor at once and get some decent clothes to wear. It'll be fine seeing you back in dress clothes, pater! Stiff collar and diamond studs and nice patent leathers on your feet. What?"

Harold was becoming restive.

"Do get a move on," he pleaded. "We ought to be pulling out for Worplesdon Common."

Sir Thomas swung around to him.

"But, Harold. My—my boy! Surely, it is your intention to stay at Highfield Court with us?—with your mother and me and—and Hogan?"

"Thank you, pater," said Harold, dryly, "but I'm afraid the life would be too exciting for me. I've been in the moat this afternoon through accident. I don't want to get in there again by design. Naturally, we'll look you up when we're passing this way. Now, Reggie, old thing! What about getting aboard?"

Sir Thomas grasped Virginia by the hand and

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

whispered in her ear. She smiled and nodded, a new light showing in her eyes.

"Reggie," said Sir Thomas, and cleared his throat, "it is my privilege to say that during the last two or three years you have achieved wonders. To think that you would do this magnanimous thing for me and your mother—the buying of this old family roof-tree, brings tears of gratitude to my eyes. Indeed, I am blessed in my sons."

Aunt Agatha said, sharply :

"Tom, don't make a dam' fool of yourself by trotting out those old platitudes. Make up your mind what you're going to do. The house is yours if you wish to take it. If you don't, let Mr. Jolson sell it to his friend. This isn't the time nor the place to wheeze those old gags about thanking God for your children. Rank hypocrisy—that's what it is. You've had a great time on the road : if you think you can have a better in this fusty old prison, it's for you to make your choice." She turned to Sadie. "Have I said it, kid?"

"You have spoken," said Sadie, with studied calm.

"Then, that's that," said Aunt Agatha. "Say your piece, Tom, and let's all get back to our jobs." Aunt Agatha walked to the door. She halted to say to the disconsolate Hogan : "All right, Dublin ! You're going out with the draft." Then she passed into the open air and made her way to her caravan.

Sir Thomas gave his shoulders a vigorous shake. He assisted Virginia to rise to her feet. He threw back his head and said :

"Reggie, we go with you. Life is sweet, brother——"

"Stop," Reggie commanded. "Say that again, and you stay here. For keeps. Now, Sadie, lead the way to The House With the Golden Windows. I want to have a few words with your father."

On the move ! On the move !

Rumbling along the hard high-road. Caravans

ON THE ROAD! ON THE ROAD!

lurching and swaying, buckets clinking and clanking. On the move! The sun laughing down upon them, the hedgerows dipping a curtsy as they passed.

On, on, on! And there was the Common, where first they met those old troupers, Buggs and Marie, who had shown them the way to a new life and a happy.

Yellow gorse alive with the droning of bee; clean wind sweeping across the distance. And, then—oh, joy!—the sound of singing.

“On the Road! On the Road!
On the long, grey, rolling Road.”

From the leading caravan in which Sadie and Reggie were riding, came a shout of exultation:

“Ricardo!”

It was passed along the column of caravans:

“Ricardo! Ricardo’s coming along! Ricardo and Phoebe!”

“With the blue sky above
And the wind that I love
And a fond heart to lighten my load.”

Reggie halted his line of caravans.

“Ricardo and Phoebe,” he shouted. “Mater, it’s Phoebe. Six caravans on the road. Bravo, Ricardo!”

“Do I envy a king on a throne of gold?
Do I envy the birds on high?”

“Hi! Ricardo!”

The approaching caravans stopped.

Ricardo, resplendent in the swaggering clothes he loved to affect, dropped down from the driving seat, turned, and lifted Phoebe to the road. Hand in hand, they came to The House with The Golden Windows.

“Comrades of the open road, I give you greeting,” cried Ricardo.

“A handshake, Ricardo,” cried Reggie. “How goes it, boy?”

“Life is sweet, brother! The——”

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Oh, forget it," moaned Reggie. He sprang at Phoebe and clasped her in his arms. "Cheers, kiddie! Cheers! Come quickly and tell the folk all about it."

Very beautiful, very happy was Phoebe, the wife of Ricardo. Very tender, very beautiful was the manner in which she wound her arms around the neck of Virginia, her mother.

"Yes, I am happy, dear mother," she said. "I didn't believe there was so much happiness in life."

"How do you do?" said Sir Thomas, rather stiffly, as Ricardo approached him.

And Ricardo dropped the pose, for this occasion only.

"Fine, Tom, old man," he said. "How's yourself?"

Aunt Agatha gave a shriek of joy.

"Come here," she shouted to Ricardo. "I heard that and I liked it. Come here." She reached up and grasped him by the shoulders. She pulled down his head towards her. "I've never kissed you: I'm going to do it now," she said. "You're a man after my own heart."

And all that Sadie said to Phoebe was:

"Phoebe, darling! I think you're the loveliest thing in creation—next to my Reggie."

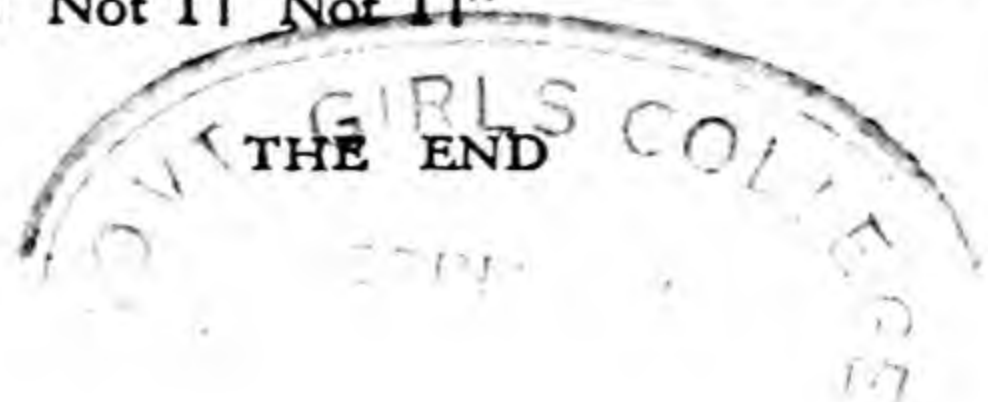
They told of their romance. And the Shadrows told them of theirs. Ricardo was moving south. They were heading north. They would meet again. They would meet as comrades—comrades of the open road.

They said good-bye, and the horses took the strain.

Reggie called in a ringing tone along the column:

"Let 'em have it! Now! All together!"

"On the Road! On the Road!
On the long, grey, rolling Road!
With the blue sky above
And the wind that I love
And a fond heart to lighten my load.
Do I envy a king on a throne of gold?
Do I envy the birds on high?
Do I ask for more? Do I sigh for more?
Not I! Not I! Not I!"



HUTCHINSON'S EARLY SUMMER LIST *for* 1931

General Novels

Wet Afternoon

A volume of stories

GEOFFREY MOSS

Author of "Little Green Apples", "That Other Love" (10th thous.),
"Whipped Cream" (35th thous.), "Sweet Pepper", etc.

A VOLUME from the pen of Mr. Moss is an event of some excitement. One does not know quite what form it will take, except that one can be reasonably sure it will be full of sparkle, of wit and delicate situations. In this volume Mr. Moss gives further evidence of his brilliance and versatility. He parries, he thrusts, defends and attacks, but always, whatever he may be doing, he entertains.

7s. 6d.

Shellan's Secret

EMMELINE MORRISON

Author of "Lone Wood" (3rd impression), "Jack Rivers' Wife" (43rd thousand), etc.

FOR generations the old Castle on the Devon Coast had belonged to the Shellan family, and many were the legends surrounding it. Long ago it had been a monastery, and more recently the home of smugglers. On the death of old Arthur Shellan, although a will was believed to have been made, none could be found, and for many months the ownership of the Castle and the money hung in the balance.

Mrs. Morrison, in her usual brilliant manner, tells us of the battles of wits which take place amongst the claimants, and of who, in the end, gains the inheritance.

7s. 6d.

HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers), LTD.
34-36, PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON

GENERAL NOVELS]

The Fifth Commandment

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

Author of "Into the Land of Nod", "Quinneys'", etc.

THE Fifth Commandment is a commentary upon certain phases of modern domestic life. Mr. Vachell deals seriously but humorously with the conflicting claims of youth and age, and attempts to hold a balance between them.

It is a novel of many characters cunningly contrasted; and it holds an enthralling story. One of our leading critics, after reading the manuscript of this book, pronounced it to be Mr. Vachell's high water-mark—a greater achievement than *Brothers* or *Quinneys'*. It will be of interest to see whether or not Mr. Vachell's immense public is of the same opinion. 7s. 6d.

Trinity

ROY BRIDGES

Author of "And All That Beauty", "Negrohead", etc.

WHEN Mr. Bridges published his first Australian novel, it was apparent that a novelist of the first order had appeared upon the horizon of Australian literature; and his successive stories enhanced the reputation made by his first.

Negrohead, his last book, will not readily be forgotten; a grim, powerful study, it made a deep impression. *Trinity*, although in no wise a sequel, comes as the second volume of a trilogy commenced by *Negrohead*, and is an equally powerful drama of a man whom wrongful imprisonment had made embittered and brutal. His wife, standing loyally by him, strives with all her might and with all her love to mend his broken soul. 7s. 6d.

After Rain

NETTA MUSKETT

Author of "The Flickering Lamp", "The Open Secret", etc.

MAUREEN DELISLE gave herself that name for want of a better. Even as a servant she was film struck, and when she refused the advances of the son of the family for whom she worked, the parents in gratitude booked her fare to Hollywood. But, before she even reaches land again, she is destined to experience many adventures which make delightful reading for Miss Musket's large circle of admirers. 7s. 6d.

The Time of Gold

DIANA PATRICK

Author of "Heart's Garrison", "Barbara Justice" (11th thousand), etc.

DIANA PATRICK has written many delightful and refreshing stories, all of which have achieved considerable success. She writes with a delicacy of touch and perception, her powers of description are vivid, and her sympathy with her characters is complete. *The Time of Gold* is a story of rare entertainment, and concerns itself with the life of Lotti Loring, who, at the age of twenty-three, having achieved success as a singer and mimic, finds her career threatened by scandal. 7s. 6d.

The Man Who Had Everything

DOUGLAS WALSH

Author of "Find the Lady", "Spider Girls", etc.

MR. WALSH's new story is a spirited one. It deals with the romance of Lilian Lane and Tony Barrington, and with the efforts made to frustrate it by the young millionaire, Godfrey Burton, who himself was in love with Lilian. Although he had everything that he could wish for in the material sense, the one thing he most wanted eluded him. By trickery, cunning, and intrigue, he sought to ruin Barrington; but in the end, as in all good tales, true love conquers and Tony is left happily in possession of the girl he loved. 7s. 6d.

Green Sanctuary

MARGARET BAILLIE-SAUNDERS

Author of "Scarlet Sails", "Mary Simnel's Marrying", "Upstarts", etc.

GREEN Sanctuary is a novel of absorbing interest—an alluring study of a loveable rake who stands midway between the influence of two women—an angel and a robot—and the tragedy which results.

As one reads to the surprising end of this fine story, one is conscious of a challenge and a question. Which of the two men who figure most prominently in it possess in greater degree the spirit of saintliness? There is one, in the story, who thinks perhaps she can answer that question. 7s. 6d.

Eve the Enemy

TICKNER EDWARDES

Author of "The Honey-Star", "Sunset Bride", etc.

MR. EDWARDES, who has lived for many years in the quiet villages of Sussex, is a shrewd yet kindly observer, and in *Eve the Enemy*, he recounts, with deft touches of humour and pathos, the story of South-Down village life—its joys, disappointments and sorrows, its aspirations and loves.

7s. 6d.

The Greater Kingdom

MAY SUTHERLAND

Author of "Boss o' High Springs", "A Question of Loyalty", etc.

MISS SUTHERLAND has here written a powerful and original story. It is the story of a rich man and owner of a big factory who, standing for Parliament, fell in love with the wife of his Labour opponent. From this situation Miss Sutherland has, with her customary skill and verve, evolved a novel which should prove thoroughly acceptable to her many thousands of readers.

7s. 6d.

In Old Toledo

G. M. MASON

Author of "A Citizen of Nantes", "The Besom of Destruction", etc.

IN this, her latest story, Mrs. Mason turns her attention to the days of the Spanish Inquisition and tells the story of a youth who, after suffering intense cruelty from an uncle, escaped from the dungeon into which he had been cast, and was taken by a doctor and nursed back to health and strength.

7s. 6d.

First 2s. edition of

Sweet Pepper

The novel that made

GEOFFREY MOSS

famous.

THE *Observer*, at time of publication, said: "If this is a first attempt it is remarkable indeed. One may safely say that the writer of it is an efficient novelist ready made . . . this extraordinarily sincere and frank study, true to life in every detail. . . . A book to be read by every intelligent man and woman who can get hold of a copy."

2s.

Detective, Mystery & Adventure

The Nightborn

LEO GREX

Author of "The Tragedy of Draythorpe", etc.

ON a dark, squally night in early autumn a mysterious submarine emerged from the North Sea close to the English coast and surrendered to a waiting motor-boat two prisoners, a young girl and an old man. On the same night the Honourable Ronald Blassington—better known to his friends as Ronnie—lost his way on the East Anglian moors, accompanied by the urbane Hannibal Skeats, valet, philosopher, and pugilist. The two eventually stumbled across an inn, the Moonrakers, and there they fell foul of "Madame". Before dawn broke Ronnie found himself embroiled in deep mystery. A story of love and mystery and hatred in a setting alive with danger. 7s. 6d.

Watch Mr. Moh!

JOAN A. COWDROY

Author of "The Mystery of Sett", etc.

MISS COWDROY has set for our old friend, Chief-Inspector Gorham, a case full of complications. A valuable and historical necklace was lost by Lady Pomfrett at the most exclusive and tactfully managed club in London, and the only persons who could have left the club in the brief interval between the theft and its discovery were a number of well-known theatrical people. A relentless search was instituted, but not until five days later, when an unknown man was murdered on an escalator, did Gorham hear of Mr. Moh and obtain his first clue. 7s. 6d.

Crime in the Arcade

WALTER PROUDFOOT

THE coroner held it to be an accident, but eccentric old Mrs. Grundling called it murder! She had been sitting beside the man when the roof fell, and loudly proclaimed that her scapegrace nephew Nicholas was at the bottom of it.

Mary Marden, niece of the dead man, and a friend, Jerry Hay, try to solve the problem. They find clues, but all contradictory, and are about to give up when a girl motorist is found dead in Berkshire, her car windscreen broken, and a dead owl in the body of the car!

How, with the aid of an astute Berkshire inspector, they link up the murder at Newsbury with the death in the Bewmouth Arcade makes a story which is at once exciting and mystifying. 7s. 6d.

Killing no Murder

MAURICE G. KIDDY

Author of "The Watcher in the Wood", etc.

A STORY abounding in thrills, in originality, in dramatic situations, in humour. What was the Murder Club? How had Henry Kenley (Harold's brother) been blackmailed into the services of its secret committee? Why was young Trevannion murdered at King's Cross, and why did he leave his money to General Wilcox?

Harold Kenley, telling his astounding story, thrills not only his group of listeners, but everybody who reads this book. How he, with the spontaneous aid of the apparently irresponsible but wholly lovable "Stone-Wall" Steevens, solves the mysteries makes a thriller to be enjoyed to the full. 7s. 6d.

The Sands of Windee

ARTHUR W. UPFIELD

Author of "The Barrakee Mystery", "The Beach of Atonement", etc.

THE Australian novels of Mr. Upfield are notable for the vividness of their setting. Mr. Upfield knows intimately the conditions of life in the Australian Bush, and his descriptions of life out there are remarkably interesting. *The Sands of Windee* is a mystery story and has for its hero a remarkable half-caste detective who acquired the imposing name of Detective-Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte through a facetious episode in his extreme youth. His adventures are thrilling and how, by his clever powers of deduction he arrives at his conclusion makes an unusually interesting yarn. 7s. 6d.

Eastern Slave

PETER MARTIN

Author of "Malayan Nights".

THE dramatic story of Private Joe Burnish, who failed to join his ship at Singapore through stopping to rescue a Chinese slave girl from a thrashing. Taking the girl with him he makes for Penang, where he hopes to join the home-going ship. The Fates, however, decree otherwise, and he finds himself plunged into a succession of thrilling experiences in which kidnapping, hardships and love all play prominent parts. Mr. Martin shows a fine sense of characterization and he knows his backgrounds of Malay and China intimately. A robust story which should appeal to all lovers of adventure and excitement. 7s. 6d.

Non-Fiction

Guilty or Not Guilty ?

GUY RUSSELL

Barrister-at-Law.

STORIES of crime, vividly and dramatically told, possess unfailing fascination for millions of readers. In this book the object of the author has been to present a panorama of crime in its most intriguing aspects. Of the fifty stories, all chosen to illustrate some particular phase of crime, more than half are staged in foreign countries, from France and Belgium to the United States. The rest are among the best-known and most dramatic of British stories.

There are dramas of murders shrouded in such mystery that the world's cleverest detectives have utterly failed to penetrate them—of crimes inspired by passion—by jealousy—by the insensate fury of women scorned—by revenge and by greed—by the maniacal love of killing. There are stories of cold-blooded murderers who masqueraded as saints, of Delilahs who played with equal cunning the rôles of Madonna and murderess, of beautiful women who lured men to destruction, of monsters in human guise who killed as lightly as they drank a glass of wine, and of the world's cleverest and most impudent impostors.

Illustrated, 12s. 6d.

The Diary of John Baker (1751-1778)

Barrister at the Middle Temple and Solicitor-General of the Leeward Islands :

Being extracts therefrom, deciphered, transcribed and edited with an introduction and notes by

PHILIP C. YORKE, M.A., Oxon.

Licencié-ès-Lettres, Univ. of Paris, F.R.Hist.S.

Author of "The Life and Correspondence of Lord Chancellor Hardwicke", etc.

A RECORD of life, family history and society in the Leeward Islands, and at Teddington, Twickenham, Southampton, Chichester, Horsham, Brighton, Tunbridge Wells, Bath, Margate, and London ; and of visits to France, Germany, Holland, and Denmark.

21s. net.

Do you read

The BOOKFINDER ILLUSTRATED

?

THE BOOKFINDER seeks to aid the man in the street in his selection of reading matter. It recognizes that, for the vast majority, the essential duties of a book are to entertain, to stimulate, and to arouse interest.

The reviewers contributing to **THE BOOKFINDER** are not specialists. They praise the books they honestly consider worth praise and damn the books they do not. They are not biased by reputations; they are not afraid to damn when the great lights of criticism are praising. They have no axes to grind.

In addition to these sound, helpful reviews, the magazine contains each month a selection of articles on general literary topics by some of the most popular authors of the day.

*Published monthly at sixpence net
and obtainable from all booksellers and
newsagents.*

Subscription rates

7s. 6d. per annum.